

CORRECTED VERSION

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2011–12

Melbourne — 19 May 2011

Members

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Witnesses

Ms M. Wooldridge, Minister for Women's Affairs,

Ms G. Callister, Secretary,

Mr J. Higgins, Acting Executive Director, Corporate Services Division, and

Mr D. Craig, Executive Director, Industry Workforce and Strategy Division, Department of Human Services; and

Ms J. McCabe, Director, Office of Women's Policy, Department of Planning and Community Development.

The CHAIR — I now welcome Ms Gill Callister, Secretary of the Department of Human Services; Mr Jim Higgins, acting executive director, corporate services, Department of Human Services; Mr Doug Craig, executive director, industry workforce and strategy, Department of Human Services; and Ms Jill McCabe, director, Office of Women's Policy, Department of Planning and Community Development.

I call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 5 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information relating to the budget estimates for the women's affairs portfolio. Welcome again, minister.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thank you very much, Chair. It is very pleasing to be here to present on the women's affairs portfolio. There are clearly some things I will talk about in relation to the output measures for women's affairs, but, by the nature of this portfolio, I will also touch on some of the broader aspects of the women's affairs area for women in Victoria.

The 11–12 budget delivers to families and women in a number of different ways. There are a number of measures in relation to supporting vulnerable women and their families, and there are some specific new initiatives in relation to maternity services, which is obviously something that goes directly to the heart of many women. We have new investment in supporting women's economic participation in community and economic activities and then broader things that go to the heart of things women care about — community safety, cost of living, access to health services and improving local community infrastructure. I will run through some of the different aspects of them.

In terms of supporting vulnerable women and their families — and some of these actually come under me with another hat on in relation to other portfolio areas along with women's affairs — antenatal and postnatal support is a new initiative for women who are at risk and whose children, as a result, are also at risk. There is a new investment there.

There is a new investment in psychiatric facilities for women to ensure that they can be safe, and there are also new eating disorder programs. There will be a new one of those at the Royal Children's Hospital, and this budget invests some capital in relation to delivering that as well as expanding other eating disorder programs — and we know eating disorders affect women disproportionately compared to men. There is also an additional investment in respite and accommodation. Once again women are overrepresented as carers in terms of who does the caring roles, and access to things like respite helps to sustain them in those important and valued roles.

Particularly in terms of responsive maternity services, as I have mentioned previously under mental health there will be a new mother and baby unit to support women with postnatal depression at the Bendigo hospital, and the investment is here in this budget. The maternal and child health line is being invested in to continue to deliver it, and maternal and child health scholarships are being provided. Maternal and child health nurses do an incredible job not only in terms of protecting young babies but also in making sure that young mums and new mums are on track. We are also investing in the benefits of breastfeeding, an important aspect for women who have children as well.

There is a new initiative specifically under the Office of Women's Policy in relation to economic participation. We know that economic participation is a pathway out of poverty and disadvantage, and we want to target women particularly to assist them in being able to actively economically participate. But we will also continue our investment and the previous government's investment in things like the honour roll of women; the women's register; the Rural Women's Network, which has been going now for many years; the Queen Victoria Women's Centre; and consultation and engagement on women's policy generally.

Family violence is one of those areas that goes to the heart of issues that women face, because once again women are affected disproportionately by family violence. There is investment in the budget to expand the family violence services that are currently being delivered and to have a strong agenda in relation to preventing family violence. Those investments are reflected in this budget as well. We have signed up to the national plan to reduce violence against women and their children. These investments will help us to deliver our commitments in relation to that national plan.

I would like to take a minute to touch on some of the broader issues that women care about and that we are investing in as a government — things like additional police officers; additional transit safety police; new brawler vans in public places; PSOs on train stations; further investment in the management of sex offenders,

which is an important issue; and continuing to invest in community crime prevention. We know women feel concerned about safety in relation to being out and about — not just vulnerable women in psychiatric wards but those right across the board. We believe the government's focus on community safety will be important to help women feel confident in terms of engaging in their communities more broadly.

The budget also invests in easing the cost of living, and I am sure we will have the opportunity to talk in more detail in relation to concessions on electricity, water and sewerage, ambulance memberships, carers cards and those sorts of things. It is a good budget in relation to things that women care about. We are investing in health services, as I am sure the Minister for Health talked about, and also supporting local community initiatives.

As I said, there are good initiatives in the budget in relation to women's policy areas and important investments across the board which women welcome and which will make a difference to their effectiveness and ability to achieve their potential and participate actively in our community.

The CHAIR — We have a bit less than 30 minutes for questions on the women's affairs portfolio. I note that in relation to this portfolio and the outputs for which your portfolio is directly responsible, it is a whole-of-government coordinating portfolio in relation to matters affecting women, and therefore you have touched in your presentation on a range of issues which are initiatives in this budget that fall outside your direct portfolio responsibility but with which you have a direct engagement. I have no doubt that members may wish to discuss some of those issues with you, given that you have raised them in your presentation in the context of the way they affect your portfolio of women's affairs. Given that one of the key issues in every portfolio is population growth, I ask: how have predictions concerning population growth shaped the budget for 2011–12 and the out years in relation to women's affairs?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — With women being nearly 51 per cent of the population, population growth of course directly affects women in all aspects of it. As I mentioned in my overall presentation, the broader issues that we are investing in to deliver in relation to the growth in demand for services are critical in ensuring that women can access services, infrastructure and support.

Specifically what we are expanding under the women's budget are issues in relation to family violence. The expansion of services to prevent family violence will ensure that, while this is an issue that is growing in recognition and understanding as the population grows, the provision of these sorts of services and support along with strong prevention activities grows as well. Making sure that we have new prevention initiatives in relation to family violence will reflect some of that growth, and we will particularly make sure we can target that to growth corridors and to newly emerging migrant groups. There are some different attitudes in relation to women from different cultural backgrounds, and we must ensure that women can actively participate and enjoy the rule of law that we have here along with the norms, the cultures, the support and the equality that we have for women in this environment.

In terms of new investment in economic participation, we will be targeting those areas where we have groups such as newly arriving migrants as well as targeting new and emerging growth corridors and suburbs, where women can feel particularly isolated and excluded. We will be targeting those more vulnerable groups in relation to our delivery of services to ensure that they can participate in the economic prosperity of this state and be successful in their own homes and in their environments as well.

Ms HENNESSY — Thank you for your presentation, Minister. It was definitely a whole-of-government perspective. I note that the Chair has given us permission to put those whole-of-government issues in play — —

The CHAIR — Insofar as they relate to the women's affairs — —

Mr PAKULA — Within reason.

Ms HENNESSY — Everything affects women, Chair. The minister herself would no doubt tell you that, as the advocate for women's policy across government.

I am happy for you to take some of these questions on notice, Minister, but in respect of budget paper 3, page 233, I had a little difficulty in regard to the performance outputs as they relate to your portfolio. I will just ask if you could provide a list of the lapsing programs. I note in your presentation you had one new initiative around female economic participation and literacy. There was in fact such a program last year. I suppose what I

want to ask is: what is new that the Office of Women's Policy will be doing in the next 12 months — what new program that was not done by the previous government?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — What is new is the new investment in economic participation. That is going to be a new program, and it is going to be different from what has been done before. Currently we are in consultation with the women's sector in relation to how that is delivered. There were a number of programs that the previous government had not funded beyond 30 June this year, and one of our concerns in relation to reflecting on those programs was that they were not specifically targeted to particularly women who were disadvantaged and needed additional help.

The transition of the Office of Women's Policy from DPCD into DHS has allowed us to keep some of the general programs but also try to think about how, when we are investing in women, we can do it in terms of where that investment will have the greatest impact. For example, the financial literacy program that the former government ran was very positive; we had very positive feedback in relation to it. But what we did notice is that anyone could access it — it was universally available. People who could afford to have their own independent financial advice, for example, were able to access a general program on financial literacy rather than targeting those who would not otherwise be able to access such advice. Our new investment of 2.4 million will work specifically to support marginalised women in the most disadvantaged communities to support their economic participation and leadership.

A number of other things are continuing what has been done. For example, the former government's investment in family violence has been very positive and has been supported in a bipartisan way.

Ms HENNESSY — A terrific program.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — We will continue to work in relation to that investment. The exciting opportunity is the previous government had not determined how that money would be invested. So the scope for our work is to work out how to invest that money in terms of family violence most effectively to change outcomes for women in relation to family violence, to get the message through to men and to make sure that we reduce the incidence of family violence overall.

With this small budget of \$7 million, it is a combination of continuing work that has been done — refining it, improving it, targeting it and making sure it is directed to those most in need — and new investment in relation to the economic participation of women in marginalised communities and them being able to participate effectively.

Ms HENNESSY — Is the issue around targeting why programs such as the Returning to Earning grants, which helped to support women to get back into the workplace have been abolished, why the workplace toolkit that assisted women in being able to come up with flexible work practices or —

The CHAIR — One question at a time would be good.

Mr ANGUS — You have had your question. Let the minister answer the question. You have given her about four.

Mr MORRIS — How many supplementaries do you want?

Ms HENNESSY — why the Working Families Council has been defunded? Is that why?

The CHAIR — Ms Hennessy, you know the rules: an apposite follow-up.

Mr PAKULA — Why have they all been defunded?

The CHAIR — Minister, when you are ready to respond.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Every government needs to make a decision. The previous government made the decision not to fund in an ongoing way a number of programs.

Ms HENNESSY — They are funded to the end of this budget.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — We made decisions in relation to new funding and election commitments in relation to all areas. What we have determined, because there was no ongoing funding and there was no future funding allocated in budgets, is to target specifically the economic participation of marginalised and disadvantaged women as a way to invest to change outcomes for the future. That is not to say that other things have not made a good impact, but we have decided that our priority focus and the way we can make the biggest difference for disadvantaged women in particular, being able as we are to link in with other DHS-type programs to leverage it — there are no-income loans programs, there are all sorts of good initiatives that we can link in to — is to invest through this new program of economic participation and to continue a number of other programs that did have ongoing funding, such as the honour roll of women, the rural women's network, those sorts of things.

Ms HENNESSY — A lot of cuts.

Mr MORRIS — Minister, continuing in part the previous answer but also going back to your presentation, I would like to pursue for a minute the family violence issue. Certainly I know from my work with the Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee in the last Parliament that, sadly, levels of family violence are still way too high and unfortunately the way many in our community think about family violence requires change, to put it mildly — cultural change obviously. Cultural change does take a long time. It is required and it will take a long time, but many Victorian women simply do not have the benefit of time to achieve that change. I ask you specifically what action the government is taking to ensure Victorian women are safe at home and that those who are, sadly, victims of family violence can access the services and the support that they need?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — That is a very important question. As I have said, the investments of the previous government, which were supported by the coalition in opposition, have been positive, and we are going to work very hard to maximise the outcomes of those investments. In addition, we have been very pleased to sign the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children. This is in the context, as you said, that nearly 80 per cent of all family violence victims are women and 92 per cent of the reported rapes are of women and girls. More than half Australian women will experience some sort of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. They are very significant numbers.

We will be focusing, as part of the framework that the national plan established, to work on communities being safe and free of violence, that relationships are respectful, that indigenous communities are strengthened — because it is of particular interest to and an important issue for indigenous communities — that services meet the needs of women experiencing family violence and that the justice responses are effective and that perpetrators are held to account. There is a whole package in relation to that. Some of them you can do quicker than others, but we will certainly be working on all fronts.

This budget invests over \$12 million from the women's policy budget in reducing violence against women initiatives. There are a number and range of things, from a VicHealth toolkit — Everyone Wins — to investing in online resources for young women who want to get the information through that mechanism. There is investment in how we make sure that we eliminate violence and portrayal of the violence in the media. There are the Women's Domestic Violence Crisis Service and the MAV, local councils, and the role that they play in relation to family violence. I have to say that initiatives like the white ribbon initiative I think have been very positive because they incorporate men as part of the solution to family violence as well as just focusing on women throughout.

We are also introducing new prevention-of-violence pilots, and I will be very shortly announcing those pilot sites, with over \$1 million in funding to work with schools, workplaces and maternal and child health services. There is actually a range of initiatives in a whole lot of different forums that will work very directly with reducing violence against women.

I think the other thing that is really important is investing in the workforce at the service delivery end as well as the broader cultural change and the prevention agenda. I was actually out at a family violence service just on Friday, and they were talking about the need for emergency accommodation for women through the refuges, how important that is and how they actually can be more effective by combining and collaborating with other services. The sector also sees a need for reform to be more effective to deliver to women in a comprehensive and therapeutic way. I think it is a very exciting time. We certainly are committed to reducing violence against women, both preventing it and making sure we have an appropriate response when it occurs.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, I note the machinery-of-government changes whereby the Office of Women's Policy was transferred from DPCD to DHS as of 1 January this year. That is correct, isn't it?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Yes.

Ms HENNESSY — This information may in fact be publicly available, but on the DHS website there is absolutely no reference to the Office of Women's Policy even being in existence. My question is: in regard to women's representation on government-appointed boards, what target has the government committed itself to and what has been the performance in respect of raising the representation of women at senior positions within the VPS?

The CHAIR — There are two questions. We might separate them.

Ms HENNESSY — Women's representation.

The CHAIR — Minister, would you firstly like to clarify the issue about the website? Can we have some advice from the department about that?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — The last time I googled 'Office of Women's Policy' I got it straight up. It is certainly there and available. Whether it is linked through the DHS site, we can certainly check that —

Ms HENNESSY — It does not exist. I can guarantee it.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — but the Office of Women's Policy website is still available and online, and we will make sure that it is easy to access. I am just getting a note saying that we are working on the redevelopment of the website with DHS but those services and all the things that the Office of Women's Policy makes available are still on the web. If people choose to access them, they can, and we will make sure that they are easily accessible and available.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister. I think that the follow-up question, which I will treat as a follow-up question, is about representation.

Mr PAKULA — The first one was not a question. You made it a question, Chair.

Ms HENNESSY — It was a heads-up. We go to your department and your own portfolio does not exist.

Mr O'BRIEN — He is trying to be helpful, I believe.

Mr ANGUS — It was a question. There is no doubt about it.

Mr PAKULA — It was not actually asked as a question. You turned it into a question.

The CHAIR — With great respect, if the member did not want the minister to respond, she should not have raised the matter. Minister, would you like to respond about representation?

Ms HENNESSY — Your portfolio does not exist.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Our government is very keen to promote women on boards and in senior roles and promote the important role women can play in all aspects of community, business and political life and representation. We have a range of processes to assist with that. As I have mentioned, we will be continuing with the women's register as part of the Diversity Register, and in fact we see some opportunities to actually improve that firstly through an evaluation, which has never occurred in relation to the register, to make sure we are delivering and linking the women who are putting their hands up to roles and opportunities. We want good people from diverse backgrounds who have the capacity to do the job in the range of senior roles in the public sector — —

Ms HENNESSY — Point of order, Chair.

The CHAIR — What is the point of order?

Ms HENNESSY — I asked the minister if the government had committed to a target.

The CHAIR — The minister is answering your question.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — What we are committed to is absolutely ensuring that women and people from diverse backgrounds are represented at all levels of the public service, of government, of business and of the community. We have a range of mechanisms to do that, and we will continue to be vigilant, as will the Office of Women's Policy. We continue on all our appointments to engage the Office of Women's Policy in relation to those appointments on who is appropriate to ensure that good women who have the capacity to do the job are eligible, considered and often appointed to the many positions.

Mr PAKULA — If the answer is no, just say no. What a massive fudge.

Ms HENNESSY — No target. You are the Minister for Women's Affairs and you are not prepared to commit to a target to improve women.

Mr ANGUS — Minister, I am particularly interested in budget initiatives around women's health, and I note there are some on page 43 of budget paper 3 as well as some matters that you covered in your presentation earlier in this session. I would like you to inform the committee what steps are being taken by the government to ensure that Victorian women have access to the safe and targeted health services that they need.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — I am pleased to have the opportunity. I know I have touched on it previously, but I think it is very important in the context of this women's affairs discussion to touch on some of the measures we are undertaking in relation to the safety of women and their access to health services. In particular, a very strong and consistent message is that women in mental health services are not feeling safe, and their recovery is affected by their nervousness in relation to their environment. Our investment of \$4 million in improving safety in the mental health facilities is going to go a long way in relation to those services.

The other thing of course is our investment in maternal and child health nurses and making sure we have scholarships so that we have good quality people with appropriate skills in those roles. That is a real entry point for many women to generalist services — when they have a young child and are facing the challenges that are associated with that. We are also investing in that as well as breastfeeding services and support in excess of what has been invested previously. Health and women's health is a really important issue for women. We are investing in a very specific way for women around their health, which we think will lead to better outcomes for them.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, I was interested in your presentation, particularly in respect of some of the community safety initiatives. I was just wondering what challenges do you see female protective services officers having in respect of the coalition's commitment for there to be PSOs on stations from 6.00 p.m. to midnight, particularly in light of some of the capital challenges we have heard about in the evidence given to this committee and women's capacity to do things like go to the toilet in the workplace?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — The key thing is that the government has made it very clear that we will be investing in the capital changes that are needed to deliver this policy and that we will also be undertaking and delivering the training to ensure that people who are operating as PSOs have the training and expertise and the knowledge to deal with their roles. I am sure that women, equally as men, who put up their hand for this role will be appropriately trained, appropriately supported and have the facilities that enable them to do the job.

Ms HENNESSY — Every woman PSO will be able to go to the loo?

Mr PAKULA — So there will be toilets at every station?

Ms HENNESSY — Toilets? Terrific!

Mr O'BRIEN — I would like to ask you, Minister, questions in relation to budget paper 3, page 119, and in particular the helping women's economic participation program, which is listed there above the men's shed program. I note that research makes it plain that women do not participate in the economy at the same rate as men, so my question is: through this package and through other measures in the budget, some of which you have outlined in your presentation, what steps is the government taking to encourage economic participation amongst Victorian women?

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — Thank you, Mr O'Brien. It does give me a chance to elaborate a bit on our economic participation initiative, which we are undertaking in this budget. For a variety of reasons women are more likely than men to experience economic disadvantage in their lifetime. We are committed to try to increase their participation. Things such as lower earnings, lower superannuation balances on retirement and time out of the work force to care for children all contribute to this economic imbalance in relation to what many women face, particularly for women who may have disabilities, experience illness or are victims of family violence — often this economic disadvantage is exasperated through that process. In fact what we see in terms of the numbers is the superannuation differences — earning levels are different, so the superannuation levels are different — and, as I have said previously, there has been some good work on financial literacy. However, we do want to particularly target disadvantaged women in relation to their economic participation. And we are committing \$2.4 million in this budget around women from disadvantaged communities, their economic participation and their leadership. As you have said, this is on page 119 of BP3. It will be directed towards programs that are linked to areas with high unemployment rates. For example, to enhance marginalised women's opportunity to develop job-ready skills and experience to do that. We are working closely with the women's sector, with different groups to work out how best to deliver this to make sure it is targeted at the women who need it most and where it will make the biggest difference. But there is no doubt developing job-ready skills, supporting them to take initiative in relation to their own small businesses, making sure that the impediments to their economic participation are removed are going to be a real focus, and this will actually deliver some significant benefits to women in terms of their participation in our economic activity.

The CHAIR — Ms Hennessy, I think I will foreshadow that this will be the last question.

Ms HENNESSY — Minister, I note your answers talking about the focus on disadvantaged women, but you would no doubt agree that it is important that women are equal before the law. I am interested in terms of what advocacy you and/or the Office of Women's Policy will be taking in respect of the review of human rights charter and the proposed review of the Equal Opportunity Act — both are important legislative initiatives that have sought to advance the legal protections of women before the law.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — It is a very good question and a very important question. I committed probably two months ago now, during my oration for International Women's Day, to engage through the Queen Victoria Women's Centre with their broader constituency group to have a discussion in relation to exactly these matters. We see that as an opportunity to be proactive, to make sure we have got feedback and input in relation to both those who reside at the Queen Victoria Women's Centre but also the women who were there. A number of questions were raised with me, and I thought that was a very proactive opportunity. We are in the process of establishing a date and a time to do exactly that. The office of the Attorney-General is going to participate in that as well, and we are very excited about making sure we are engaged in a discussion about both the human rights charter and the Equal Opportunity Act generally in relation to these issues and making sure women have their say in that process.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Minister. Ms Hennessy has a follow-up.

Ms HENNESSY — Given that the amendments to the Equal Opportunity Act have already been introduced into Parliament by your government, how is it that you see that consultation influencing the legislative process?

Mr ANGUS — A point of order on relevance to the budget estimates process.

Ms HENNESSY — Hello? We have invested nothing in women's policies so we are going to walk through every portfolio and put it before this committee — come on!

Mr PAKULA — Can I — —

The CHAIR — I do not need any more on the point of order. I am going to allow the minister to respond.

Mr PAKULA — Thank you.

Ms WOOLDRIDGE — In fact there is an increase in the investment on last year's investment in the Office of Women's Policy by quite a significant amount, which I am very pleased to deliver, despite some assertions to the opposite. There are always opportunities to engage on legislation and where it needs to go in the future. We

are always open to those ideas and we will continue to engage in that process to consider legislation. Nothing is static. There will be opportunities in the future, and that is why we are having these ongoing discussions.

The CHAIR — Thank you very much, Minister. That closes the hearing on the women's affairs portfolio, and I thank Mr Craig and Ms McCabe for their attendance.

Witnesses withdrew.