

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Shepparton—Wednesday, 20 November 2019

MEMBERS

Mr John Eren—Chair

Mr Gary Blackwood—Deputy Chair

Ms Juliana Addison

Ms Sarah Connolly

Mr Brad Rowswell

Ms Steph Ryan

Ms Kat Theophanous

WITNESSES

Ms Amanda Kelly, Chief Executive Officer, and

Ms Jane Gehrig, NILS/Economic Empowerment Worker, Women's Health Goulburn North East.

The ACTING CHAIR (Mr Rowsell): Amanda, Jane, welcome to the public hearings of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee's Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege; therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. You will be provided with a proof transcript of the evidence taken today, and those transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. Thank you very much for joining us. Do you have an opening statement or something you would like to start with just to give us a bit of background about who you are and your organisation?

Ms KELLY: Yes, we do. Thank you very much. The first thing I would like to say is thank you very much for coming to us to consult around this. It actually is part of the theme of what we are wanting to talk about today. Women's Health Goulburn North East is one of nine women's health services across Victoria funded by the Department of Health and Human Services. Our particular organisation services the Goulburn and Ovens-Murray areas, and we work in the primary prevention space. We work primarily with partner organisations to build capacity, knowledge and frameworks to improve gender equity for better health outcomes for women. We work with partners and local and statewide networks across several key areas, including the prevention of violence against women; sexual and reproductive health; the impact of gender on planning for, living through and recovering from disaster; as well as economic empowerment.

One particular area that we do work in is we provide no-interest loans, and we are part of the no-interest loans network. And I have got a very, very brief case study that I just wanted to give you. So we are based in Wangaratta. We have a client who has a lived experience of family violence, was homeless and has been relocated to transitional housing, which is a caravan park that is a 70-kilometre round trip from Wangaratta. She is on a Newstart benefit. She has no car. There is a bus service that services the area once a day. She came in to us because she wanted a loan for a computer so that she could complete a free TAFE course in Wangaratta, and this would enable her to complete the course and hopefully find work. So she needed the computer for accessing information for her course as well as access to health and community services, pre-employment and communication, and also to be socially connected and for her banking et cetera and online work.

So essentially the barriers that she is facing are: she is in a remote rural location; limited—very limited—transport; she has safety issues if she wants to come into town; she has got to stay in town all day for her class or for work or whatever it is that she wants to do; there are limited opportunities for courses in the area; even though she has got a computer, there is limited access to internet where she is; also, having lived in the city, she has had to then get used to the climate up here, which is a lot colder and a lot hotter than being down in Melbourne; and she has got no networks up here at all—she is alone.

One of the things that we wanted to look at is some of the things that we are able to do at the moment around this, so the NILS scheme at the Women's Health is a women-centred scheme. It provides loans and referrals to other agencies, so one of the things that we do is help to connect her up with other agencies. Also, being a women-centred service, it is safe and welcoming, and we meet with her face-to-face so we are able to form some connection with her. We can link her in to other services in the local area that are trained in a trauma-informed approach. We are also able to tailor the loans to suit her particular needs, and we also have a website called Centsable, which is one that we have developed for people for resources.

That is just a basic idea of some of the clients, and this woman is not unusual, unfortunately, in this. But one of the key areas for us is around access. I think that is probably it. Have I covered everything, Jane?

Ms GEHRIG: I think you have.

Ms KELLY: Okay. So yes, that is really what I wanted to start with. So her barriers are actually being able to get to work—well, she cannot get to classes to start with and then be able to get to work. This is particularly around the No Interest Loan Scheme but this is something that we find no matter where we are working, particularly in sexual and reproductive health as well: being able to access is very difficult. So if you are on Newstart, can you afford the petrol to get to your class? Can you afford the petrol to get to your work placement? And if you do get to your work placement, if it is a low-paying role, how do you manage that?

Some of our women have got casual work, which is fantastic. They want to work, but of course if the casual work increases too much, they lose their Newstart. Getting back onto Newstart is very difficult. So they have casual work, it is coming up to Christmas and their employers might want to increase their casual work, but they cannot do it because they will lose their Newstart and they are too afraid that there might be a gap between getting onto it again, so they turn down the casual work and therefore they are not offered more casual work. So yes, these are some of the key things that we are sort of seeing around barriers to employment—that people are willing to work but finding it difficult.

Ms CONNOLLY: It has just come to my mind. If women in this region are struggling with transport basically, if they do not have access to a car or cannot even pay for petrol, what is the access to child care? Because if you have got children, being able to drop them off to child care and then go to work—but if they are catching a bus that runs once a day, what is the situation with that?

Ms KELLY: You do not get to go to work. There is very little child care. Jane, you might be more across what child care is available.

Ms GEHRIG: Yes. I would say so, and especially if you are not working already, the barrier to even get into that and then continue on to do something. This client that we were speaking about here did not have children, but the school bus, the regular state-run school bus, was the one that was coming into town. So even suggesting to try and get child care, to some women, and try and get a casual position—there are just too many barriers to even get there. One of the stats that I wanted to tell you, as I am a worker in this program, is that over 30% of the loans that I have approved in the last 12 to 14 months have actually been for car-related items. That has been for us an increase—such things as mechanical repairs, tires and rego. And when you are not in the city, these are things that are just so needed out here.

Ms ADDISON: Fundamental.

Ms GEHRIG: Yes. Petrol, freedom to get to appointments for children, for your own health care, for family members. It is something that is really overlooked especially, as we have already talked about, with the Newstart being so low. Some of the loans we do here, women feel like they are a lifesaver, that they keep them in the community, they keep their life happening. Also, too, another thing that we probably need to address is the housing—how expensive rental housing is. Often people will move out of town, which is even further away from the services, and if they do not have a car, it is even more isolating. So, yes, it is a really complex issue.

Ms CONNOLLY: And just one last question: you might smile when I say this, and I will know the answer. Have you seen any women then try and pick up work that they can do from home?

Ms KELLY: We have got a little bit of anecdotal evidence around that but not a lot of stats around that. Some of those issues are connectivity, so if you are working from home, actually being able to, say, if you wanted to, set up an online business. That is very difficult to do. We are in Wangaratta. We have NBN, and it works. But you go 10 kilometres out, and it is very spotty and not necessarily there. So that is one thing. I think the other thing is, again, if you are working from home, if you are producing things, of course transport becomes an issue again. Jane, are there any other issues?

Ms GEHRIG: That brings up another thought bubble that we had. In the city you have these things called coworking spaces, which are very exciting. I would love to have a hot desk somewhere, but in regional areas we really do not have that. That might then enable some women to come in and connect and be in safe spaces, and also meet other people who might be doing courses or networking. So that was the thought bubble that we came up with the other day, which is something that probably could be quite easily set up and it might offer opportunities for women in a lot of ways. We deal with survivors of family and domestic violence, and that is a really important thing—that the spaces that we have are safe. So that might be something that could be done in the area, even if it started off slowly. But with our services, because we are all connected, it would be really easy to get women on board with that because we are connected in with other services. We have networks over here in Shepparton; we have them all throughout the Hume region. So I am not sure if that could start something that might be able to—

Ms KELLY: Yes, so a women-only coworking space I think. There is one really good example in Melbourne that we have started to think about and explore. But those spaces do provide for women who can flexibly work. Then they can flexibly work and in fact even look at online jobs, which is a really increasing area and something that you can do more flexibly.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: There are certainly some great models of that in Melbourne with One Roof—

Ms KELLY: That is the one I was thinking of.

Ms THEOPHANOUS: and also in the Northcote electorate, Happy Hubbub. They do a coworking space that is also linked to an on-site childcare, which works really well.

Ms CONNOLLY: You might have just been here, listening to Leanne talk about TAFE. There are lots of jobs around, but quite often if you have got limited transport and you have got children, it can be really difficult to get to major town to do the TAFE course. Do you think there would be an uptake of women wanting to take up courses if they were offered, I guess maybe out of the TAFE facility, out of the classroom, in more safe environments with children and women, those courses? It is really accessible.

Ms KELLY: Absolutely. I mean, when I was listening to her speak about that, I was thinking, ‘Yes, I can see how that would be more attractive and more accessible to some women’. And I think, particularly if you do have a background with family violence, a safe space is something that is really important. That is an intersectional issue for so many people, so culturally safe spaces as well. But having somewhere, yes, that child care has been thought about would be fantastic for some of the women, I think. And also, what Leanne was talking about, that reluctance, saying, ‘Well, I can’t go to that big building where people learn. I’m not that person. I only went to Year 10. I can’t do that’. So making those things more accessible in that way. But I also think that having the outcome out of it. As she said, there are a lot of courses out there and it is wonderful to learn. I was a recipient of free tertiary education; I think it is fantastic. So getting that education is great, but having the pathway I think is also a really good thing to build into those sorts of changes.

Ms GEHRIG: Can I add to that? I think it would be also really important, if you did engage the women or the participants, to have support, like mentor supports. There are other programs that have had mentor supports. I used to work in a PHaMs program for mental health, and that was really supporting the person to build on their skills and to get back into life and re-engage. I think really if you had mentors in, even if you had 1 to 5 or whatever the ratio was, someone to be able to support that person, the woman on her journey—it is sort of like a counselling role but also, too, maybe a bit of lived experience—to continue through, go through the ups and downs but get there in the end. Sometimes we do not realise how isolated these women are. They do not have supportive family sometimes to assist them through. They might not be engaged with caseworkers at the moment, and they might not have a friend—well, they do not have a work colleague if they are not working—so I think something like a mentor program could really help to gel and probably get some really good outcomes.

Ms ADDISON: I come from Ballarat, so we have Women’s Health Grampians, which does amazing work for our community—and thank you for the work that you are doing for your community as well. The Andrews Labor Government is very proud of our commitment to address the issues of family violence, with nearly \$3 billion going towards programs. Tell us, from being based in northern regional Victoria, to what extent have the recommendations from the Royal Commission into Family Violence—and I know all recommendations have been committed to but they have not been funded—addressed employment outcomes for women experiencing family violence from your perspective?

Ms KELLY: I have been living in this area and in this role for about four months, so I do not have an extensive background in that. I can talk to you specifically around women’s health. We have some funding specifically from the *Free from Violence* pool, funding specifically to address prevention of violence. There is not anything in that that specifically directs us to look at employment. Our approach, as you will be aware from Women’s Health Grampians, is intersectional. We try to look at all of the barriers to good health, including social inequity and therefore violence. So where those things come up, we will look to a partner to work with them around it, where we have identified it. But for us, this is all I can speak to with my experience. For us, I am not seeing it addressed specifically in our area.

Ms ADDISON: We are also very interested in older women. What are the challenges for older women seeking employment, and how could these be overcome?

Ms KELLY: I think once you have hit 50 you are ‘invisible and unemployable’. It is very difficult. The variety of jobs—so, again, I was listening to Leanne talking about commercial roles, but a lot of that is in manufacturing, and those sorts of areas are not necessarily where older women’s skills lie—they can be, but not necessarily. So there is not a great range of roles. You have got that to start with. Then there is the self-perception—women who have been out of work because they have been caring for children or family, wanting to contribute, wanting to get in, so there are not necessarily roles, but then also maybe feeling inadequate around that and feeling that they do not have anything to offer.

Ms ADDISON: Amanda, we often talk about unconscious bias, but we think it is beyond unconscious bias that a candidate presents and she is a woman over 50 and, ‘It’s just not what we are looking for’.

Ms KELLY: No. If she even gets to present, because of that unconscious bias, I think. You have got two different résumés. And even if age is not on there, of course you are looking at experience and you can see where she sits. I mean, that is just a fact that that is happening.

Ms CONNOLLY: Would it be right in saying that women over 50 would be more likely as a cohort than younger women to have their licence and have a car so they are able to access jobs or training or appointments and things like that than the younger—

Ms KELLY: Again, I have got very brief experience in this area. We do not have any evidence around that, but, Jane, do you have any anecdotal—

Ms CONNOLLY: Just a feeling of what you see.

Ms GEHRIG: Well, considering we do do a lot of loans for car repairs and tyres to keep cars on the road—I do not know what the statistics would be. But generally if women can have a car, they will try and keep the car on the road matter what and no matter how old it is.

Ms ADDISON: Jane, just to clarify: when we are talking about a no-interest loan, what would be the average figure?

Ms GEHRIG: Our average is around \$1,200. We can lend up to \$1,500 to anyone. We do through the whole Hume region. We also have a program that is for family violence survivors who have had that experience in the past 12 months, and we can loan up to \$2,000. So that is what we work with.

Ms ADDISON: Amazing.

Ms GEHRIG: It is amazing.

Ms ADDISON: It could be a real lifeline for many people and keep them in a home rather than being homeless.

Ms GEHRIG: It does, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for being here today.

Ms KELLY: Thank you.

Committee adjourned.