

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into sustainable employment for disadvantaged jobseekers

Melbourne—Wednesday, 4 September 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 Jocelyn Bignold, Chief Executive Officer, McAuley Community Services for Women;

Ms Donna de Zwart, Chief Executive Officer, Fitted for Work; and

Ms Stella Avramopoulos, Chief Executive Officer, and

Dr Sarah Squire, Head of Women's Research, Advocacy and Policy Centre, Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearings for 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. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and also being broadcast live on Parliament's website. Rebroadcast of the hearing is only permitted in accordance with the Legislative Assembly standing order 234. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible.

Obviously the forum is a question and answer session, and due to the number of participants and our time being obviously limited, it may not be possible for everyone to answer each question. We will hear two or three responses and then move to the next question if that is okay. The Committee is keen to make sure that all participants have a chance to have a say. If you wish to respond to a question, please raise your hand and wait until you are invited to speak and state your name each time you speak to assist Hansard reporters. If there are any important points that you want to make that you do not have the opportunity to make at this forum, you are invited to provide the Committee with your additional comments in writing after the hearing, which we will treat as a supplementary submission. Thank you for attending today.

We will go straight into questions if that is okay. Can I just firstly ask: Jobs Victoria, how effective is that in terms of a policy position, from a state perspective, in creating employment opportunities for women particularly?

Ms BIGNOLD: We are a JVEN provider, so we specialise in working with women who are disadvantaged jobseekers, and the predominant barrier is family violence. We are finding that if we did not have access to the Jobs Victoria contract, we would not be able to support women into employment at all.

The CHAIR: So how can we improve our services? Are there are things that we could do better?

Ms BIGNOLD: Yes, and I note a question to the earlier panel about the 26-week milestones. One of the things that we understand—we work alongside and behind women to get them into work. And so the contract requires us to prove that she has been in work for 26 weeks. We have been described as having an empowerment model of employment support. However, that means that the employer does not necessarily know that we are involved. And if she is travelling okay after 26 weeks and she does not want to give us payslips, we cannot prove that she is in work beyond that time and so we do not get paid as per our contract.

So the 26 weeks—it depends on which way you are looking at it. In terms of the women, the longer they are in jobs the better. But in terms of the contract requirements, if she wants to get on with her life and does not want to be part of the family violence service any more, then at 52 weeks she will not want to know us. She will not be verifying the evidence that she is in a job. So that is my comment about the 26 weeks.

Mr ROWSWELL: So the current process as is in place at the moment is not working from your perspective?

Ms BIGNOLD: No, there are some flaws in the contract. And we are working with the Department on that. One of the other ones is that one of the features of family violence is that she can be found, and if she needs to abandon her job or leave for a period of time, especially to go into a refuge, then we have got a four-week window to get her reemployed, and that means we can count the 26 weeks. So if she drops out at 25 weeks and needs to be in a refuge for more than four weeks and cannot go into that job or a subsequent job, we have lost that place—

Mr ROWSWELL: There is no flexibility?

Ms BIGNOLD: Yes, that is right, because family violence is not considered a category for the JVEN contracts at this point.

Mr ROWSWELL: Have you articulated these changes to the departments or summarised them for them?

Ms BIGNOLD: Yes, and we are hopeful that in subsequent contracts that might be able to be rectified, but at the moment that is the situation. Also, if she is out of that window and she does come back for a second job, we are actually not counted as a second placement. So we can only count one person, one placement, one outcome.

Ms CONNOLLY: Can we talk a little bit about childcare services? We have heard other organisations talk about child care being a barrier for women, for young women and that the types of work that disadvantaged women are going into may not be that 9 to 5 role, and particularly for single women. Can you talk a little bit about your thoughts about current childcare arrangements and suitability for disadvantaged women going into work?

Ms de ZWART: For a lot of women that we assist, and we assist women from all different cohorts who are experiencing disadvantage, for those women who do have children the way the current childcare system is set up is not conducive, particularly if they have got casual work. For a lot of women who have been out of the workforce for a period of time, they might start with some casual work. If they have been long-term unemployed, we may direct them to some volunteering opportunities to get a little bit more experience, but of course that is unpaid. So it is the lack of flexibility.

Ms AVRAMOPOULOS: I think as a service system we need to appreciate the unintended consequences that can be there for women with child care responsibilities. In achieving the outcomes of job placement and economic participation that your Inquiry is focusing on, because they have further care responsibilities of children, the wellbeing and welfare of those children, particularly for the most marginalised women, is quite critical. So as a service system and as an organisation Good Shepherd has to deal with the whole family unit and household. So child care is part of a broader issue of how we manage support for women who have got quite competing care responsibilities, and for some of them we are trying to disrupt an intergenerational cycle of welfare dependency and disadvantage. So an outcome in job placement, employment and economic participation has to be seen as a joint outcome with wellbeing of family and children, because we are managing both at the same time.

Dr SQUIRE: I was going to say in some of the research that we published last year we interviewed a range of single mothers on the Welfare-to-Work regime and child care came up as a significant barrier in terms of availability. But also, going back to the other comment around flexibility, a lot of single parents are in and out of precarious forms of work, often still on income support at the same time. Of course with child care, if you are buying child care you have to book it in advance and you cannot unbook it at the last minute; you have to pay for it. So a woman who is doing casual work who loses her shift at the last minute still has to cover child care. So that is a key barrier, particularly for that cohort. I would also say out-of-school-hours care of course is really critical. That is something that is funded at the state level, so that would be an area to look at, particularly for mothers of school-age children.

Ms AVRAMOPOULOS: Flexibility is part of the capacity issue as a service system and also within a capacity issue, responding to when women need supports and services and how we deliver the access of those to them. Also closely linked to that is the capability of that service system and employers to identify and respond to women who, as mentioned, are in family violence and really help to navigate the service system. Part of the response needs to identify when the objective of finding someone employment needs to be paused in order to consider safety issues and the care and wellbeing of children.

Ms ADDISON: As a woman who may have been out of the paid workforce for a number of years because of her caring responsibilities, or a woman who has suffered family violence—getting a job is all about confidence. It is about being able to walk in and look someone in the eye and say, ‘Hey, I am the best thing that has ever happened to your business. You should employ me. Pick me’. But when you lack confidence because technology has changed, there are no more fax machines and suddenly there is all this digitalisation of the workplace, or there is just a genuine, ‘I’m not worth anything; why would anyone want to give me a job?’, what support do you provide these women? What role could our Government play in supporting you to support these women?

Ms de ZWART: With our service I would say that close to 80% of the referrals to our service—and we are not a recognised government service, but over 80% of the referrals come from government-funded agencies to

us. We provide a service that is built by women for women. It is a safe space. It is the first place often where women can tell their whole story. We know that for 99% of the women that we see confidence and self-esteem is the underlying issue, regardless of whether they are a refugee, migrant, single mother or a woman exiting a correctional facility and so on. So our programs are all about being holistic and wellbeing. And certainly confidence and self-esteem are key, but it is also about having women with you along for the journey, because everybody's journey is unique. So it is about getting women ready for work, getting women into work and then, once they are in work, assigning them with a mentor that will help them through those shaky moments, because often getting employment can exacerbate issues that woman may have prior to going back into the workforce.

Ms BIGNOLD: I would like to add to that. We do have access to digital literacy courses through our local neighbourhood house, and they are very, very good. I can get you more details if you need them. We also work on a case management basis, so one to one, and the self-esteem, the motivation and even driving them to an interview, those sorts of things. It is a really practical response. We have caseloads of one case manager to 40, and we do a lot of intensive support. We also work in partnership with Fitted for Work, because there is nothing better than when you are fitted properly and looking good. We also have a really good partnership with Westjustice financial and legal clinics, and they have, in less than two years, resolved \$400,000 worth of debt. So if you can think about that in terms of looking for work and just your overall outlook in life, those are the factors that really make a difference.

Ms AVRAMOPOULOS: As a government and as a significant employer of women in, certainly, Victoria, I think there is a significant leadership role you can play around driving culture and encouraging men to have a more active role in taking up opportunities and creating opportunities for their parental leave and participating in and doing more of the heavy lifting at home for women. At a national level I think there are some real unintended consequences and significant harms that are being created around welfare conditionality for women that are tipping women into support services when we do not want them in support services. We too want them to be actively involved in employment. Leadership needs to come together from all sectors to really address some of the structural barriers that are just there for the most marginalised women in particular.

Dr SQUIRE: I was going to say I think the role of coaching is really critical. You heard a bit about mentoring from previous speakers. We have had a lot of success with the program called Firmer Foundations, which is a financial capability program, and that involves one-on-one coaching, as well as group work, brokerage and that sort of thing. There would definitely be a role to expand that program, or a program like that, in terms of having links with employment as well. So what Stella was saying earlier about the holistic approach and looking after the whole person, there would be lots of ways to incorporate it across existing programs with an employment focus as well.

Mr BLACKWOOD: In terms of employers, how do you think they could operate in a better way to accommodate the needs of women living with disadvantage?

Ms BIGNOLD: A couple of things: I think in terms of family violence if employers are aware of what family violence is and the impact it has on employees, that has a twofold impact. One is that the better informed they are and educated on family violence, the more likely they are to protect their current employees so that they are not slipping out into unemployment, and the more able they are to accommodate the flexibility required for women who are moving into the workforce. So that is one thing. Another one is the provision of properly paid permanent part-time work. A lot of the women are testing themselves in the employment market again and do not necessarily want to go straight into a full-time job, but they do need a living wage. They are not actually able to pay their private rental with part-time or casualised jobs unless it is a proper, ongoing job.

I think, too, the recently formed JobsBank is going to be a real opportunity for us as an individual JVEN contractor. For us to try and negotiate jobs with every single employer is a very big deal. We do not have time for that. So if JobsBank will come in and be a meeting place for contractors and employers, I think that would be good. I also think that might be an opportunity to destigmatise disadvantaged jobseekers, and I think somebody has mentioned that that is a leadership approach because of the advantages that these employers that we are working with bring to the workforce. They are some of the ideas that we would have.

Ms de ZWART: I think there has been great progress made by the Victorian Government, particularly with the advent of the social enterprise strategy. For example, we run a social enterprise called SheWorx. That is

where we connect women directly with employers as a placement service. The push from Government around procurement and being able to work with social enterprises has made a big difference for us. We are starting to see lots of Government departments wanting to employ from our bank thousands of women who are ready to work, so I think that is making a big difference, and I would encourage the Government to continue with that process.

Ms ADDISON: Older women looking for work—we know that they are particularly vulnerable in terms of increasing levels of homelessness amongst older women. What are some of the challenges you have seen firsthand that older women are facing in terms of trying to get sustainable employment?

Ms de ZWART: A growing number of the women that we see are older women, so 50-plus. We have even had women who are in their late 60s coming to us looking for work, because of all the systemic issues—we know they do not have enough super and so on. Again, confidence is the first thing, but it has to be a holistic approach. So the first thing we need to do is ensure that a woman is ready for work. If she is homeless, for example, that is not something that we would look at. We are purely about employment. And it is about giving her all the tools that she needs to enter the workforce, and then again it is about assigning her with someone who will help her once she is in the job. What we are finding is there are a number of women who are in their mid-50s, they may have worked all of their lives but perhaps for whatever reason they will hear a whisper that a role might be made redundant. They have not had a résumé for six years. They will go through their savings, their super, before they will put up their hand and ask for help. So I think an early intervention model, such as the one that we offer, is key so that when a woman hears a whisper or is concerned about her job, she knows that there is a central place that she can go to update her résumé, whether it be her wardrobe but certainly her interview skills and anything else that she might need to keep her relevant in the workplace. Currently there is nowhere for her to go.

Dr SQUIRE: We have talked a lot about confidence, which we agree is important, but we also have to talk about some of the harder things like age discrimination and sex discrimination. If you think about older women and what they might be facing—older women over 50—we have a lot of these women among our client group, women who have lost a job perhaps around the age of 50 and assumed they would get another one cannot get another job. These are women who have dipped into all their superannuation already. They have nowhere to go, they are on Newstart. Many have quite complex health issues, many have caring responsibilities, whether that is for their children who have complex needs or for parents or indeed community responsibilities.

We would have to look at some of those really hard more structural issues. I think there is obviously a role that government can play as well; perhaps in setting some targets for employment of older workers, making sure you are applying a gendered lens to that and looking at the particular barriers that older women might face, and maybe also looking at increasing entitlements for workers with caring responsibilities, particularly caring for ageing parents or spouses who might be unwell—because it is women who continue to do the overwhelming majority of that care. It has enormous social and economic value. So I think it is not just about individual competence; it is about some of those harder policy levers that you might design to assist in this area.

Ms BIGNOLD: I would like to add that a lot of the women that you are suggesting were coming through, we are not actually seeing in our services at present. We think that is because if they have been in the workforce, however precariously, they are not accustomed to seeking support when they need it or early enough. So it is really about an early intervention opportunity. We have to go back and find the triggers—at what point? So perhaps it is when they stop paying into super. What is the trigger point that means that we can intervene? Also is there some sort of wage subsidy? There is a definite gap between when they stop working and when they are eligible for a pension, and what is that gap? I think we have to move back further up the chain and find out where that trigger is.

Ms de ZWART: If I can just add to that, for the last two years we have been working with the Commonwealth Bank. One thing that all women will have in common is they have a bank account, and often that is the first trigger point: they are late on a mortgage payment, or they might be late on paying their credit card. The Commonwealth Bank, through their own research, has found that for 60% of those women actually it is because of not enough work or unemployment. They have funded a hotline directly to us where we start working with women right at that point, so that is an intervention. Seventy-seven per cent of the women that we have been working with will get work within 64 days. On average if you are over 50 it takes you up to

18 months. So that prevents women from dipping into their super, from having to lose their homes and so on. Often women are their own worst enemies in putting up their hand and asking for help because they do not see themselves as disadvantaged until they hit rock bottom. So that early intervention is working really well. We have had over 2,000 referrals from the Commonwealth Bank, and we think that is just the tip of the iceberg.

So that is a model that I think should be encouraged from government and certainly to the corporate sector for stepping in as well. Of course the banks are more than happy at this point in time to start working on those types of models.

Ms CONNOLLY: Thank you. That is very interesting. Are you able to provide some examples of employment programs that have had successful employment outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women?

Ms BIGNOLD: We are not working in that area particularly, though some of the women are coming through. Just an example that might be comparable is working with a group of women in Shepparton from a particular cultural background. Some of the training providers have gone in and the women have ended up with debt and qualifications that they cannot use. So it really is about working, I think, more in a community development style rather than an individual placement style. So we can only just say it is a like program that we think is transferable.

Ms de ZWART: We have a number of women that come through our service from that background. It is hard to gauge. They often do not self-identify, but also I suppose the connections with those communities we do not have the resources to develop either, so a lot of them do not know that the service is available—and also to work with them to make our services more culturally appropriate to those women.

Ms CONNOLLY: This one is a little bit unusual. I have been thinking about it for a while as we have gone through different groups. For women in particular, do you know of any research that has been undertaken into the impact of women unable to get work or taking long periods of time away from work and being unable to find a job, the impact that that is having on their children as they grow up to be young people who are struggling to find a job? Do you see a connection with that?

Ms de ZWART: Just, I suppose, from our own case studies, we have seen, when we have worked with women, certainly those old women in their 50s with teenage children or young adult children, what a difference having a job makes to their children and how they view work. Often it has been a case of, ‘Can I bring my children in through this service now as well?’. It has a massive impact psychologically. A job is not just about economic security; it is certainly the self-esteem and the confidence, but when a woman feels that she is waking up and she has purpose she goes home and she is going to be a better parent as a result of that. She is going to be more engaged with her community. So the ripple effect is huge.

Ms BIGNOLD: I would like to echo that. Many women that we talk to are saying how much better off their children are because of their confidence in being out in the world—the role modelling that they are offering their children and the stability that they are offering their children. So I would really like to emphasise the intergenerational benefits.

Ms AVRAMOPOULOS: I would completely agree with that. An extension of that for the more marginalised and disadvantaged women that we work with—what we hear is the stress for them, that does impact their children, of having to juggle so many competing priorities whilst holding a job, which then compromises how long they stay in that job. Often many, many women are forced to leave because something is going on with their children. If you have got three children, you are a survivor of family violence, you are trying to re-establish yourself, there is no food in the fridge and the kids are not going to school—there are trauma issues going on all over the place—it is really hard to juggle all of that and be there for your children. The greatest fear for these women is that their children end up in child protection, having a whole range of other interventions that they have had to navigate. So there is a real tension, which is why I go back to my earlier statement around: there are two outcomes we need to be secure and strategising around. One is the economic and workforce participation for women, but the other one is the wellbeing of their families, and they cannot be separated out. We have got a deal with it from a systems perspective.

Dr SQUIRE: I just wanted to add from a research perspective that there is a bit of research around the impact of maternal employment on children. Generally it is positive; however, there are a range of mediating variables that include things to do with the mother's wellbeing and also to do with the stability of employment. The quality of employment is really important. Having a really crappy job is not useful. Having a good-quality part-time job or full-time job which has benefits including sick leave—things like that—that we know women need, is really critical. So I think it is important just to drill down into the research there.

Ms BIGNOLD: Can I add one more thing? The job—it must be voluntary. For women especially in caring roles it cannot be a mandatory requirement. We have got women who have got multiple disadvantages and want to work. They are very, very keen—highly motivated to work—but it has to be a voluntary position.

The CHAIR: Thank you for your attendance. Is there anything further that any of you wanted to add before we close?

Dr SQUIRE: I would just add: we had some comments earlier in relation to CALD communities and the need to recognise the heterogeneity of those communities. It is the same with women and even cohorts like single parents. When we interviewed single parents for our research last year they basically fell into three groups. One group basically could not work because they had too many things going on—family violence, complex health issues. Another group that was highly motivated—intrinsically motivated—and had skills and had confidence but just did not have the support they needed. They could not get on with their long-term career trajectory because the Federal Government kept getting in the way and making it too hard for them. Then there was another smaller group of women that were highly skilled and wanted to start their own microbusinesses but could not access that support. So even within a group that that you think you know about, like single parents, there are a lot of differences within that. So I guess our caution to you would be to say: there are lots of differences among women; yes, there are commonalities around the caring response and things like that, but to really look at those various differences.

Ms BIGNOLD: A final comment too, and Sarah might be able to tell me if this is true, but once upon a time there was some research to say that it was more acceptable for women to be out of the workforce than for men to be out of the workforce; therefore women can be hidden. I do not know if that is still the case. There are at least 50 JVEN providers. It would be interesting to know, and I have not asked this question of them at this point, how many women are participating across the whole 50 contractors and how many women have been placed in jobs across the whole 50 contractors.

The CHAIR: Good question; we will find out. Thank you so much. Thank you for attending.

Witnesses withdrew.