

# TRANSCRIPT

## LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

### **Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria**

Epping—Thursday, 27 February 2020

#### **MEMBERS**

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Ms Georgie Crozier

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Mr David Limbrick

Mr Edward O'Donohue

Mr Tim Quilty

**WITNESSES**

Ms Julie Bamblett, Case Manager, and

Ms Karin Williams, Manager, Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services, Victorian Aboriginal Community Services Association Ltd; and

Ms Vickianne Purcell, Program Manager, and

Ms Tracey Brown, Senior Caseworker, Wilam Support Service, Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks for being here. I just have a couple of formal words that I need to say before we start this. As you know, this is a public hearing on our Inquiry into Homelessness in Victoria, and we are the Legal and Social Issues Committee. All evidence taken at this hearing is protected by parliamentary privilege, as provided by the *Constitution Act* and the standing orders of the Legislative Council. Therefore any information that you give today is protected by law. However, any comments that you might make outside this hearing may not be protected. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the Committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament. As you can see, you are being recorded today by the wonderful people from Hansard. They will send you a transcript of this conversation. I encourage you to check it and make sure that it has captured what you have said as accurately as possible. After that, it will become public. It goes up on our website and becomes part of the public submissions to this very worthwhile Inquiry.

Again, thank you all for making the time to meet with us, and also thank you very much for the work that you do. We certainly heard from some of you through the spent convictions inquiry as well, so we are just constantly impressed by what you do. If you would like to open with a few opening comments, then we will open it up to a general discussion. May I please excuse myself. I may have to just run off to take a phone call during this process, so I apologise in advance.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** Beauty. We will take care of it.

**Ms PURCELL:** My name is Vickianne Purcell. I am the Program Manager from Northern VACCA, which is based in Preston. Before we begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri people, who are the traditional owners of the land that we are on today, and pay my respects to elders past, present and emerging.

I have got a bit of a thing here to read. With Aboriginal organisations, I guess one of the main things that we deal with is that due to the effects of colonisation and across generations Aboriginal people are faced with significant social disadvantage and systemic racism. It has hindered their ability to thrive over the generations within communities and created intergenerational poverty and disadvantage amongst families and communities. The families we see in health programs. I am the manager of a family violence program, the Wilam Support homelessness program. I also have Barreng Moorop, which is a women's prison diversionary program, and emergency relief, which is financial chaos and crisis. Through all of these programs we see people presenting daily with homelessness or being at risk of homelessness.

Our main clientele through community probably would be families that are affected by family violence and young people affected through leaving care—they have been in out-of-home care and come out and are leaving care at an early age with very little skill base. Unfortunately I think in society today a lot of young people stay at home with high-functioning families. They are there until their late 20s and 30s sometimes, and in out-of-home care and leaving care they are out the door at 17 or 18, with a low skill base. For those young people we find there is a lack of affordable housing. Many of them are on Newstart, which is just not affordable for anyone to live on. We do the best we can. Tracey being the Senior Caseworker, we will refer them to different organisations, whether it be Launch Housing or Haven; Home, Safe, but there is nothing affordable for them, and we have had young people say, 'We would rather be on the streets than stay in boarding houses'.

Aboriginal people, as you would be aware, are very over-represented in the homelessness sector. In 2019, 17 per cent of Aboriginal Victorians received homelessness services, and in general it was 2 per cent—

**The CHAIR:** Sorry, could you just say that again?

**Ms PURCELL:** Seventeen per cent.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** Nearly one in five.

**Ms PURCELL:** Yes, one in five received homelessness services in comparison with 2 per cent of all Victorians. I may have the statistics wrong here, but I think Aboriginal people make up 1 per cent of the Victorian population, so that is a massive amount of people.

They present through family violence. Women and children often come into our services. They have fled family violence and they have nowhere to go. We at times can get them into refuges. We often have some brokerage for hostels or hotels even—they are staying in cheap hotels—but often the brokerage runs out very quickly and then there is nowhere to go, so we move them on to somewhere else and somewhere else.

Aboriginal families, I think, want an Aboriginal service from Aboriginal people. In Centrelink and places like that there are Aboriginal liaison workers. They are often not available or they are not in every Centrelink office or they are not in every housing office, so families feel culturally unsafe. They just want a service from an organisation that is culturally safe.

There is a lack of affordability in housing, as you all know. There are people coming out of the youth justice system. There is a risk of early parenthood, there is accessing employment, education, housing and the whole thing. Luckily we have got really strong workers in all programs, but we can only do so much when there is no housing available or there are no refuges available or there is no money available. I think one of the things we could do better is raise the age of legal care, as I think they have done in Tasmania recently.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** There's an idea.

**The CHAIR:** We are trying.

**Ms PURCELL:** I know. I think they have taken that to 21 from 18. A lot of people leave before they are 18 because of trauma and other effects on them, but we could raise that. We have kids coming out of there with no financial literacy and poor mental health and physical health. They do not have essential life skills because a lot of stuff has been done for them up until then, and then it is out the door and, 'Find your own way'. They often present to us and we try to do the best with what we have got.

Rental affordability in the private sector is not affordable—most or many of our clients would be on Centrelink benefits—and there is just a lack of infrastructure, a lack of housing. Saying this, I know that the present Government has been very, very progressive in Aboriginal business—more so than governments in the past—but there is still that lack of housing. There is not enough housing in Victoria, and I think we are down by quite a percentage in Victoria compared to the other states. As I said, culturally appropriate housing is really important, and culturally appropriate services. Our families face systemic racism on a daily basis, particularly in the private rental market, and it is ongoing. They are some of the issues that we touch base with every day.

What we do is provide a wraparound, culturally appropriate, trauma-informed service for our families. We have access to referrals within VACCA, within VACSAL and within other services that are specifically Aboriginal, and we try to refer into those organisations if possible because they are culturally safe. Specialist homelessness service for Aboriginal men: particularly young men, single fathers, we are finding at the moment is a huge issue because if you have got a single father, we have to put them maybe in a hotel and there is a man in a hotel with a 13-year-old girl and there is stigma attached to that, so men do not feel comfortable in that role. Where do we put these men that are supporting their children? They cannot go into boarding houses—they are not safe for children.

**The CHAIR:** And that family refuge is not for them.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** Because of the age, and single males cannot take children into men's rooming homes. So there is nowhere for them to go except motels. And then the money dries up, the crisis support dries up for them and where are they going from there? And it is the same with all of our cohort. All of our clients, whether it is family violence—

**The CHAIR:** And that means they are at risk of losing their children to child protection.

**Ms PURCELL:** Absolutely. We often say that homelessness is not a child protection issue, but if they are out on the street and the families cannot provide protective behaviours around that child, then it is. It becomes an issue. Then it also becomes: because they are living out of the motel system they are getting looked upon from schools because they are not attending schools, because they have not got stable housing. Also they are being sent to the same motels that the perpetrator has been sent to, using the same crisis support service. So where do we send them? How do we know they are safe when the perpetrator is using the same service, the same open-door service, that our victims are using? And that is across the board.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** Is it because we are not talking to each other? Is that the challenge here?

**Ms PURCELL:** Yes.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** And that is the only support available.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Lack of availability.

**Ms PURCELL:** I think often too when our clients flee through family violence or for whatever the issue, they flee with nothing. Where they have been living on the streets, the young men, there is no photo ID. Hotels require you to have photo ID when you go in, so we have got two or three hotels around the northern suburbs that will take our clients because they know our services.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** Then there is also a stigma attached. If we send a client to a motel and that client plays up or has an incident at that motel, then they are looking at our service, ‘Oh no, we won’t take them from your service anymore’.

**The CHAIR:** Yes, we had that.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** So where are we supposed to send them? We are running out of options for sending our homeless people. Like Vickianne said, they would prefer to sleep on the streets than sleep in some of the dodgy motels that the crisis open-door services are sending them to. I myself would not stay in some of them, so I am not going to try and send my clients to stay there, especially single women with children and young people. I would not trust them there for the night.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** So we need more stock—Julie, is that what you think?

**Ms BAMBLETT:** We do. We need heaps. We need a lot more stock. We have got growing homelessness. Nothing has changed over 30 years for homelessness. It is like, yes, there are more people; we need more stock. And it is only growing. There is nowhere to send them. We do not have any nominations. We service over 700 people, clients, a year, and we have had two nominations into transitional properties for the last two years.

**The CHAIR:** Two?

**Ms BAMBLETT:** So that is Aboriginal people through open-door services; we have only had two nominated into transitional properties. I do not know what is happening to our clients. We are sending them to open-door services; they are being returned to us. And the open-door services know we do not have the funding; we do not have no funding for crisis accom. They hold all the funding. We do not have no transitional stock to put any of our clients into. So we would like some properties and stuff for our organisation to be able to manage our clients and create self-determination through our community.

**Ms PURCELL:** And it is absolutely about self-determination too. I do not know if anyone was at the wonderful launch yesterday of the Aboriginal housing and homelessness framework at Parliament House, but many of us in Aboriginal organisations attended. It is a 16-year plan. Ministers were there, and it is wonderful. But it is about self-determination and it is a brilliant document, if anyone can get a hold of it. I am sure you will. It is about Aboriginal organisations and ACCOs having increased community control in the homelessness sector—so Aboriginal organisations having the capacity to have these services available for them to service the Aboriginal community.

**Mr BARTON:** To service their community, yes.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** Yes.

**Ms PURCELL:** Yes. And more Aboriginal workers—to skill Aboriginal workers in the role so we can have that capacity within ACCOs. So examples of cultural safety—even if families going to Centrelink, families going to all of those government offices, they need support workers much of the time. Because of just historical government policy and whatever, they like to have a support worker with them. So they are a lot of the issues that we do find.

There are also other issues at the moment with the LASN. I am not sure if you have heard of the Local Area Services Network, north and west

**Ms MAXWELL:** A few times today.

**Ms PURCELL:** You have. So they have now put an embargo on some of the boarding houses that we used because they are just not appropriate. They are almost not habitable.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** I think somebody described it as ‘dodgy’ earlier.

**Ms PURCELL:** Very dodgy, and they are not habitable; you would not put people there. And they are making a lot of money. So we have these young men coming out of out-of-home care or leaving care and they are on \$246 a fortnight, and these are costing \$110 or \$120 a night—to stay somewhere where nobody would feel comfortable.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** We have one Aboriginal hostel for families in the northern metropolitan area. We have one young female hostel, the Marg Tucker hostel, and we have one original youth hostel for males—it is an eight-bedder. And that is what we have for our Aboriginal clientele within the north-west of metro Melbourne.

**Ms PURCELL:** Hostels would be a bonus as well, and I know that they are run through Federal. They are run through Canberra now—they are not even run by Aboriginal organisations anymore, to my knowledge. But for young people they are often a safe haven. There are other community members there; they are quite safe. But, yes, as Julie said, there are three of them in the northern area—nowhere near enough. We have people coming in every day. We are funded by DHHS. I think our targets are 100 per year. We are doing 25 a month, 35 a month, of people coming in either at risk of homelessness or homeless or couch surfing. Sometimes we just have to go, ‘Well, they might be staying at Aunty’s and they’ve been at Aunty’s for four weeks, but at least they’ve got a roof over their head. We have to put this family that have nowhere’. So these people that are couch surfing feel that they are not getting a service from us because we have to prioritise.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** We have had one case study on one of our elder clients, a grandmother of nine children, and it was impossible for us to try and accommodate her in crisis accommodation. One parent—they would not accommodate her because she did not have two adults staying with her with the nine children, so they could not have two separate rooms. But she had no hope in getting crisis accommodation. We had to keep searching, searching, for a transitional property for her. In the meantime it was the Christmas break, so we had to send her to our VACSAL-owner holiday property in Torquay. Her grandchildren were attending high school and primary school in Melton, so she was travelling from Torquay to Melton every day to take her grandchildren to school, and she waited in Melton till school finished and then drove home to Torquay.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** What a remarkable woman.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** She did that for months. We ended up having to go to Children’s Court with her. One of the children was under child protection. She was questioned about schooling for the other children, but she had to juggle and get the children to school and then had to make sure that this one child was at Children’s Court with her. So we become support not only for homelessness but education support, legal support, child protection support. Legal aid did not cover her because grandparents are not covered under the legal aid system. So she had no legal support at court while we were there with her. We fed her and her grandson while they were at court for weeks. This went on for about two months—going to court with her nearly every day. She ended up ill and ended up having to return home to Queensland, to her family, because she was getting child

protection coming down on her because she had to find ways for other people to look after her children, and the only other family support she had was the parents of the other children. We went through months of turmoil with her where there was no acceptance in crisis accommodation, in motels. Yes, like, school—that is what we do, we do the holistic approach. We do not only look at housing. For our service, for VACSAL, we only have one worker in the north and one worker in the west that is doing this advocacy, homelessness support, financial counselling—everything—that teams of 16 do in open-door services. And we are getting our clients sent back to us. It is like our hands are tied to a certain extent. We have got no funding. We have got no properties to allocate our clients. We have got no other means but to advocate for our clients, and we do that on a daily basis for about five to 10 clients.

**Ms PURCELL:** I think that is why clients, community members, do get sent back to the ACCOs—because we do it so well. We have got competent staff who provide that holistic approach. It is not just housing, it is what is happening around here as well that has caused the issues. So we will be able to refer to a family violence program or a financial crisis program or playgroups—just all of these different programs we can send families to. Other organisations are sending them back to us saying, ‘Well, it is culturally safe with you’, but we just do not have enough staff; we do not have enough workers, as Julie said, in all areas. The staff do such a wonderful job with what they have got, but there is just not enough. Then it is dealing with all of that support and advocacy, but sometimes you feel that staff are burning out and are on a hiding to nothing because there is really nowhere for these families to go, even though you advocate so well and you do so well for them. As Julie said, it was months and months with this elder, a grandmother, and virtually she just got so sick that she went back to Queensland. So we deal with this daily.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Can you ladies give all of us a little bit more information? Please excuse my ignorance. Describe for me what a culturally safe housing option would be.

**Ms PURCELL:** So we have talked about the racism that our families, particularly those going into private rental properties, deal with every day. Culturally safe is where there is no denial, there is no racism, the families feel that they are being respected in a cultural way. They feel that they are valued, and their story is listened to. I think that is really important as well.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** I think trust. Trust is a big thing with our community. If we are not doing our job properly, they are not going to come back and trust us with everything else. Trust is a big thing within the Aboriginal community, because they know we work and they know we live in the community, so we see them during events, during the weekend, during sport; we see a lot of our clients. They even go to the same school as our children, so they know that they are trusting us with the support that we have promised that we can try and assist them with. We are not just going to send them off and—‘Oh, see you later’. No—‘Go to this organisation and then come back to us’. We want to continue, but we do need that other support from other services to assist. So they know that we are sending them out there hopefully to a place where they can feel safe, but then they know that they are coming back to our organisations, where they do not have to question whether they are going to be treated equally and looked after.

**Ms PURCELL:** I think one of the problems lies with what we call mainstream services. It is just the history, and historically Aboriginal people, of course, have been treated quite poorly over the generations since colonisation, and I think there is that lack of trust with what we call mainstream services. There is often a lack of ALWs, which is Aboriginal liaison workers, or officers, there, and sometimes it is because of trauma and because of the background, not understanding documents, not understanding what is being said and they are too what we call ashamed or they have this fear to ask.

**Ms MAXWELL:** I guess I conveyed that very clumsily, and I absolutely understand and respect everything that you have contributed there. For me it was more around the physicality, or what do Aboriginal people need in regard to housing in particular? So is it locations, is it a certain type of housing? That more specific information—is it different to other people?

**Ms BAMBLETT:** It really is. It comes down to location, because when Aboriginal people came to Victoria, Fitzroy was the hub of Aboriginal people. So a lot of homes were bought in and around the Fitzroy and Collingwood area. Then it went to Reservoir and now it is spreading out to Mernda. So it is where the support services are set up. A lot of support services for Aboriginal people were in Fitzroy; now there are a lot more

services growing out in the northern suburbs and the western suburbs. So it is where the services are. That is where Aboriginal communities are going to gather around and look for their housing and know that they are supported through health, through our Aboriginal health service, through education services, through community services. Our biggest waitlists for Aboriginal people are in the northern suburbs, because that is where a lot of Aboriginal support services are—through that corridor. So it is location, because they know that the support services are there.

**Ms PURCELL:** And also as those areas like Fitzroy, Collingwood and Northcote have been gentrified, families have been pushed further and further out, so now services are going further and further out. I know the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service has opened in Epping as well, so the services are moving out. Where we are in Bell Street, Preston, there is a hub of Aboriginal services. VACSAL is not far away, the Aboriginal Advancement League is not far away, we have the legal service around the corner and the health service up the road—it is a hub of Aboriginal services—but families are getting pushed further out into the western corridor and into the northern corridor. I just think that housing needs to be where the community are.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** We do not have a hub for housing and homelessness. We have hubs for health, education and community services, but we do not have a hub for homelessness and housing. So we could get a service that is there specifically for Aboriginal clients to attend, the same as an open-door service. VACSAL have been doing it since 1990—doing the hub sort of work, the open-door services. Yes, we do in-house referral to a men's behaviour program, youth programs, so we are set up as hubs but not specifically for housing. That is what is missing in the Aboriginal community; we do not have any specific—

**Ms PURCELL:** VACCA are the same. I think we have been running the Willam support program for about three years, three and a half years, but we are not an open door. So when our community members come in and say they are at risk of homelessness or they are homeless, we then have to send them back to Haven; Home, Safe or Launch, and then they come back to us. It is doubling up. It is making very vulnerable clients, who are already much more exposed and heightened—they are already in a very, very precarious position. And we are sending them off and saying, 'Yeah, and then they'll send you back to us'.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** It is like a revolving door. It is a revolving door, and it has been for years. The open-door services—we go out and we create partnerships, so our services are known to them, to their services, and how we can work together. That is what we have to do to get some support for our clients. We have to make sure that we are attending and updated on any new trends for housing and where we can refer our clients. It is about us educating ourselves on what support we can give our clients and community.

**Ms PURCELL:** And both services network really well and advocate really well, but as I said before, we just need Aboriginal-specific organisations to be working in the specialist homelessness sector, not just having support programs but actually being on par with Launch or being on par with Haven; Home, Safe in the north.

**Mr BARTON:** For the second time we have heard today that for Aboriginal people trying to get into private rental—zero. It ain't going to happen.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** We have got people that are on double income that go up against a person on one income and then get to the interview with the real estate agency, go for the inspection—'Oh, so you're Aboriginal. So you have big families, so you'll have lots of people at your house'. 'Um, no'. Or we take our clients and assist them to do private rental searches, and because we are with them, they say, 'Oh, so you're going to be responsible for whatever happens in the property?'. 'No, we are an advocate service. We're helping our clients try and get into private rental. We are not responsible for what happens with their tenancy once you sign it'. So they are getting knocked back and there is no explanation of why they did not get the property.

**Mr BARTON:** Well, I think we know.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** We know. They have to wait 10 years for public housing, and they end up giving up. Where do they go? If they cannot get into a private rental, they have got to wait 10 years on the public housing waitlist.

**Ms PURCELL:** And I think one of the other issues around that is that families that are on the Victorian housing registry, if they are lucky enough to get a private rental, then they are off that registry, and if something happens in the tenancy, they are back to the bottom of the list.

**Mr BARTON:** Then they have to start all over again.

**Ms PURCELL:** Exactly. They start all over again. So some people are quite reluctant to go into private rental because they will say, 'If something happens here or if the rent becomes unaffordable', which it usually is anyway—you know, there might be a mum and daughter living together or a brother and sister living together and sharing a property, but if the brother loses his job and they lose the tenancy, they are back to the bottom of the housing list.

**Ms MAXWELL:** Sorry, Vickianne, I would just like to welcome Karin.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I am very sorry. I tried to leave early, and obviously I did not do it very well—so my apologies. I just, I suppose, want to introduce myself: Karin Williams, I am the Manager of Bert Williams Aboriginal Youth Services. Bert Williams youth services is a part of VACSAL, so VACSAL is our head office. And I should have said VACSAL Bert Williams then, actually. But I am here advocating for young people and the homelessness of our young people coming out of the child protection system. It is a big, big issue for us and our community. And I do not only see it in our community; I see it across the board with the failures of whatever processes they have for kids coming from out-of-home care. I suppose I am a little bit passionate about it, and I want to give my thoughts on it. I have worked in Aboriginal health and further to that in youth justice, so my whole background is around supporting and working in Aboriginal community for people. And I have been on boards—national boards, everything.

One of the main things for me, working with young people that are already so out of whack with everything in community—they have been brought up in child protection; they are not taught anything. They seriously are not taught anything. They are coming out with workers saying, 'You're useless'—whatever. I do not agree with that. My thing about it is when you are at home with your family, you are taught how to live, how to clean—all those kinds of things. Our kids are coming out of the system not being taught anything, so they do not even know how to care for themselves. We are going into a process at our service that has been ongoing forever, teaching them living skills so that when it is time for going into a home they are going to know how to live—all that kind of thing.

But the biggest thing around young people not engaging—and I have never been a child protection kid, but I know plenty of kids that have—is if you grow up in child protection, how many workers do you have in your little life? If you go in from two years old or one year old or you are taken from birth, you have got nothing but child protection workers all through your life telling you how to live it, how to do things. You get to the age of 16 or 17 and you are given a targeted care package to help you move. You get sick of engaging with people at that age. We all know what it is like as teenagers ourselves. They do not take it into consideration that young people have had enough. We get paid to work with them. My thing for me is: I will chase that young person until I get to them, get the best outcome for them. It does not matter if they do not want to engage at that stage, but there are reasons for it.

I struggle with people walking away and leaving them homeless. When they come to us at that point, there are no other options for them. So I am really pushing that we start for our kids in the child protection system—they need to be taught in their homes. They are taken away from their families and put into child protection. They need to be taught all that stuff from little kids like we are taught at home by our parents, and they will not get it unless they are taught it. It is really difficult to engage with them, so I struggle every day seeing a young person not being supported because they cannot engage, and there are reasons for it. Nobody considers the thing about how many workers they have had in their lives, how many people they have had telling them what to do. I have grown up with my mum and dad telling me—that is it. How many have these young people had in their lifetime telling them how to live their life, how to do things? Half the time it is only because they get paid to do it. They do not care about the kid; they get paid to do the job. And half the time they do not want to do their jobs properly. So that is me, for that part.



But we want more funding for our young people so that we can actually get them into a space where they can be housed. A good example for us is that we have got young people right now coming in from out-of-home care. We refuse to walk away and let their workers in the departments make excuses for why they cannot engage. So we will work with them; we will make sure the young person gets through it, and that is where we are at right now, because we do not want to see them homeless; we do not want to see them on the street. But in the last probably three years we have probably had six kids come through the child protection system that are now homeless; they have got nowhere to live. And we have got to live with that, as workers.

**Mr BARTON:** And what sort of ages are we talking about when you—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** We are talking about—

**Mr BARTON:** Is it 16 to 25?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** No, 16 to 19.

**Mr BARTON:** Really?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Yes. So they are just coming out of child protection and becoming homeless. It is one of the biggest issues we have in our child protection system and our youth justice system right now.

**Ms MAXWELL:** And I think we have certainly had some reports recently in regard to the systemic issues across the board with child protection that certainly need looking at. You know, there has been more than one report, and they certainly need further investigations of how we support young people through that period. And whilst they are in that out-of-home care space, for those that have to be in that area, there certainly needs to be a lot more work done regarding the workers and things, as you said, Karin. I fully appreciate that.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** We also want more homeless services for our young people. There is not enough. There is absolutely not enough in our Aboriginal communities to service our kids. They all go to the bottom of the list because it is always about mums and dads and children.

**Ms PURCELL:** I think as Karin said before too, I think my colleagues would know that Aboriginal children are being removed from families at a higher rate than during the stolen generation now—

**Mr BARTON:** I was just going to ask you that.

**Ms PURCELL:** So all of these children are in out-of-home care. They are going to come out at the other end with very few skills and with nowhere to go. And it is support services like this that do try to manage those, but there are going to be larger numbers in the future. It is not going to go away, so we have to have policy and we have to have housing stock. We have to have funding to catch these kids as they are coming out.

**Ms MAXWELL:** I think we also have to look at and identify the reasons why they are being removed, so that that intervention can come in far earlier.

**Ms PURCELL:** Yes.

**Ms MAXWELL:** We have got to get away from having to work at that crisis level. There have got to be more interventions, so given that, can you identify some of the reasons why the children are coming out? What are some of the highest risk factors for these children?

**Ms PURCELL:** I think what we talked about before, when you were here, Karin—

**Ms MAXWELL:** Family violence?

**Ms PURCELL:** There are programs that we have at VACCA—and I think VACSAL have some as well—you know, family violence. We have family support programs—so organisations like VACCA and VACSAL are providing programs for family to empower them and to give them skills that they need to keep the children out of the child protection system. I think VACCA has over 50 programs at the moment. We are providing these programs to assist parents with parenting and to assist children to stay with their families. But then as I

said we do rely on places like Bert Williams or places like that for young people that fall through the cracks and come out the other end with nowhere. So it is about assisting the families to support the children in whatever need, whether it is family violence or whether it is whatever other programs we have; women's diversionary programs—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** And a lot of kids are becoming homeless through that family violence issue. They are perpetrating family violence against their family and they are no longer allowed to be in their home, but there is nowhere for them to go. And for some of our youth services that have got hostels or whatever, it depends on what cohort of kids you have got in there whether you take them in or not, and I think that is the biggest pressure for services too. You worry about who you bring into your service as young people because you want to help everybody, but you cannot help them all. And then sometimes if you have got a good bunch of kids and you put somebody in that has got bigger issues, it is really difficult. So if we cannot take them into our service, we actually do outreach to them; we do not just cut them off cold because we do not have a service to offer them. We will do outreach through our hostel services.

**Ms MAXWELL:** I know that was talked about in Bairnsdale.

**Mr BARTON:** That was touched on in Bairnsdale, that very matter. I would just like to know a bit about kids being removed from their family because of homelessness—and not homelessness as we know, living on the streets, but living in accommodation; there might be two or three families in the same house. Is that happening?

**Ms BAMBLETT:** Well, they are at risk. A lot of them are at risk. Even living in the family hostel—

**Mr BARTON:** So the kids are being removed from their family because of the overcrowding?

**Ms BAMBLETT:** Because of overcrowding—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** It can be unsafe, depending on who lives in the house.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** Safety.

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Safety, yes. It will be safety issues mainly about—with overcrowding—who is in the house. I mean, we know a lot of our prisoners have got children out there, and sometimes they cannot come out and be allowed into the homes where their kids are either.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** Karin, I completely listened to what you were saying about how we need more services for young people. How many caseworkers do you have at the moment?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** In our service, for our homelessness service, there are the two upstairs, but in our whole program at VACSAL we have six workers, because we work across Melbourne. We have got, in the west—

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** How many do you need?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** How many? I do not think it is the workers we really need; I think it is just more money to help us get to the things that we need. It would be good for us to have transitional properties for our young people so that while they are transitioning we can support them and teach them living skills and how to do their rent and all that, because that is something we do not have, we have never had.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** A transition property?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** No.

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** How many of those do you need?

**Ms WILLIAMS:** I reckon about three or four. I am not going to say—

**Ms BAMBLETT:** I would probably say a dozen, because then when you are looking at our—

**Mr BARTON:** Don't be shy; go for the big numbers.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** When you are looking at our cohort, we have single males. We work with males who are perpetrators of family violence in the men's behaviour program. I was asked: if I had a wish, what would it be? I would say a house for each of our cohorts. So we would have youth that our caseworkers can go in and do the work with the youth, and then we have the males where they can go in and do programs while the males are staying in the program, do the counselling sessions, any mental behavioural sessions they can do in the property. We have got young families and single females that need somewhere to go, somewhere safe to go, single males so they are not being judged at motels and everything, so they have got a safe place to take their children. We can allocate a room for a family to move in or a house, a property, to move in to while they are getting the on-hand support, the holistic support. So we are not just addressing homelessness; we are addressing all the other underlying issues, whether it is child protection or whether it is health, whether it is schooling. So we need to be able to have more staff to be able to go in and assist with the programs with transitional properties.

I am a caseworker; I do homeless outreach support. When we do get our clients into transitional properties, we work with them in that property for the whole of their tenancy. A lot of them are six-week programs, so they can only work up to six weeks, so they are looking at us to take on our clients, Aboriginal clients, for the whole tenancy of that transition property until they rent a long term. So we are long-term support—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** And that is without the supports, financially or anything. So we do it constantly without the finances. Because we care about people, we constantly do what we do.

**Ms BAMBLETT:** Because we care up until the end, until they know that they are in long-term housing or that they are on their feet and being self-determined to get employment. That is one of the biggest things with the employment services too: they are made to go to Job Network appointments without stable housing and they are getting cut off payments because they cannot attend an appointment, so they have got no income to pay for accommodation. It is non-stop loss.

**The ACTING CHAIR (Ms Maxwell):** Yes, I think we can all agree there are complete systemic failings in regard to homelessness right across the board. We have heard this since day one. Maslow's hierarchy of needs—how do you move forward in your life if you do not have some sort of—

**Ms WILLIAMS:** Stability.

**The ACTING CHAIR:** Stability with housing that you can at least—

**Ms PURCELL:** It is a basic human right for someone to have shelter.

**The ACTING CHAIR:** It is, absolutely.

**Ms PURCELL:** And unfortunately society is judged—I cannot remember the quote—on how they treat their most vulnerable people, and society is failing at the moment miserably because people are being not supported. We are in a very rich country, and this is a crisis, an absolute crisis, that we deal with daily.

**The ACTING CHAIR:** Absolutely. I am just conscious of the time. Are there any final points that you would like to make before we need to wrap up?

**Ms PURCELL:** I think one of the main points is, as Karin spoke about, young people coming out of out-of-home care is an absolute crisis at the moment. It is not going away; it is in fact becoming more of an issue. It is basically having Aboriginal community-controlled organisations with the ability and the funding to be able to provide these services in a culturally safe way. I think that is one of the most important things that we see daily with families that we work with, but we just at the moment do not have—

We talked about transitional housing, we could have housing. We deal with these people in transitional housing for the longest time. Sometimes when they get in it is a relief and they work really well. But they might be in that transitional housing for two years. We still work with them until they get permanent housing, but it is just having that ability as an ACCO to provide that wraparound service and having more than what we have at the moment.

**The ACTING CHAIR:** Tracey, did you want to say anything?

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** Yes, get her on the record.

**Ms BROWN:** No, I think Vickianne has covered everything. I did not even get a chance to say anything. I am happy to—

**The ACTING CHAIR:** Nothing else you would like to add?

**Mr ONDARCHIE:** You are formally on the Parliament record now.

**The ACTING CHAIR:** I just wanted to say given that, Karin, you were not here at the start when the formal Chair, who has had to leave—just to remind everybody that all the evidence that you have given today has been recorded. What you say in here does fall under parliamentary privilege. There will be a transcript that will be available. We would encourage you to have a look at that so that you can let us know if there are any corrections that need to be made. So, yes, it has been recorded. You are all on the public record.

I would really like to thank you for your time, for your knowledge and for the information that you have so generously shared with us. It has been a pleasure to have you here as a part of the Legal and Social Issues Committee hearings into homelessness.

**Ms PURCELL:** Thank you.

**Committee adjourned.**