



TRANSCRIPT OF DAY 3 – PUBLIC HEARING

PROFESSOR A ELEANOR BOURKE AM, Chair
MS SUE-ANNE HUNTER, Commissioner
MR TRAVIS LOVETT, Commissioner
DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR MAGGIE WALTER, Commissioner
THE HON ANTHONY NORTH KC, Commissioner

TUESDAY, 04 JUNE 2024 AT 11.37 AM (AEST)

DAY 3

HEARING BLOCK 7

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<THE HEARING COMMENCED AT 11.37 AM

CHAIR: Welcome, welcome to today's hearing of the Yoorrook Justice Commission. This is a continuation of the Hearing Block 7 that is our inquiry into the historic and ongoing Social Injustices of Victorian First Peoples. But before we commence our work, I would like to invite Commissioner Hunter to do the Welcome to Country.

COMMISSIONER HUNTER: I would like to welcome you to my ancestral lands, the lands of the Wurundjeri, and pay my respects to Elders past and present, all those that have come before us to pave the way so we are able to have voice today to seek truth and justice. And just as part of that, I would like us to all be upstanding for a minute's silence due to Sorry Business that's happening, particularly Aunty Fay. We will just take a minute's silence. Thank you. I'd just like to also acknowledge that Aunty Fay was one of the first lot of Elders to give evidence and acknowledge her contribution and efforts towards our community, across her life span. So Wominjeka. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you, Commissioner Hunter. Thank you, Counsel.

MR MCAVOY SC: Chair, my name is McAvoy, I appear as Senior Counsel Assisting the Commission. I will be taking these witnesses this morning and Mr Tim Goodwin of Counsel Assisting will take the witnesses this afternoon. Counsel Assisting acknowledges the Wurundjeri people and all First Peoples of Victoria, and we too note the sadness with the passing of a very important Elder to the Victorian community. Thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you.

MS CAFARELLA: Good morning, Chair and Commissioners, my name is Gemma Cafarella and I appear on behalf of the State of Victoria. On behalf of the State, I would like to thank Commissioner Hunter for her Welcome to Country and acknowledge that today's hearing is being held on the land of the Wurundjeri people. I would also like to acknowledge the Sorry Business that you spoke of, Commissioner Hunter. I acknowledge the Wurundjeri people as the Traditional Owners of this land, the land that the hearing is held on today and acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. The State pays respect to Wurundjeri Elders past and present and all other First Peoples who are here today or watching online. Thank you.

MR MCAVOY SC: Chair, this morning, we have witnesses from the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and I call them now. I call Alan Brown, Michael Graham and Darren Lovett and Gavin Brown. I understand that the witnesses might be known to a number of the Commissioners. If I might start first with Alan Brown.

Would you just tell the Commissioners your full name, please.

MR ALAN BROWN: Hello. Hello, Commissioners. Thank you for the Welcome to Country, Sue-Anne. Yeah, Alan, Alan Brown.

5 **MR MCAVOY SC:** And do you undertake to tell the truth in relation to the evidence that you will give to the Commission today?

MR ALAN BROWN: Absolutely, yes.

10 **CHAIR:** Michael Graham, could you please tell the Commission your full name, noting that you've been here before?

MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: Michael Bruce Graham.

15 **MR MCAVOY SC:** Do you undertake to tell the truth with respect to the evidence that you are to give today?

Mr Darren Lovett, could you tell the Commissioners your full name, please?

20 **MR DARREN LOVETT:** Darren Andrew Lovett.

MR MCAVOY SC: Do you undertake to tell the truth in respect of the evidence that you will give to this Commission today?

25 **MR DARREN LOVETT:** I do.

MR MCAVOY SC: And, Mr Gavin Brown?

MR GAVIN BROWN: Gavin Thomas Brown.

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MR MCAVOY SC: Do you undertake to tell the truth with respect to the evidence you will give the Commission today?

MR GAVIN BROWN: I do.

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CHAIR: Welcome. I haven't seen some of you for so long, it's great to see you again.

40 **MR MCAVOY SC:** Thank you, Chair. Now, I understand there are some opening remarks that the members of the panel would like to make, and after that, there is a proposal to speak to a PowerPoint presentation from which questions might then be asked. The Commissioners will note that there's also a written submission from the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service pertaining to one of the materials. Will you each be making introductory remarks or has someone been
45 nominated to speak on your behalf?

MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: I think what we would like to do is announce who we are so that people understand our background and our history and knowledge of the work that we work in, a little bit of background on each other, on ourselves first and I will start with an opening. But we look at, as the story of ours which happens to be also the story of health determination for our people in this country.

MR MCAVOY SC: Thank you, do you mind if I call you Michael? So shall we follow the same order in terms of introductions that we took for the undertaking? Would you like to go first, Alan?

MR ALAN BROWN: Yep. Sure. Yeah, Alan Brown. I'm Gunditjmara. Like having said I'm Gunditjmara I know the beautiful Country I'm from and where I'm connected, but I grew up not far from here. Grew up in Collingwood, grew up in Fitzroy, literally on the doorstep of the Commission. So I know, in terms of a vast context, I'm an urban Koori. I know the city. I know the noise. I know the environment and that's part of who I am.

I've been at VAHS for - look, I think it's mid-30 years, over 35 years. So I've sort of stopped counting after a while. I've been a board member for a long time, over 20 years; chairperson for over 10. Held various roles through the board. Had a couple of stints in senior management positions but also, managed the men's unit and at the moment I'm the ambassador for VAHS, which is a fancy title. I think it might be the first one in Victoria, possibly the country. It's a good vision of VAHS, it sort of indicates who we are in terms of our thinking, where Mick and others said, "Look, we need to get the best out of you." So ambassadorial role. So I make a speech, cut a cake, you know, cut a ribbon, you know, all that sort of stuff but also come and advocate for the organisation and I do manage a lot of the history stuff for the organisation.

But I do know VAHS really well, because I've lived it since I was about 20 years old, that type of thing. I'm a life member. But - so some of that sort of goes beyond that with my involvement with other parts of the community health sector like VACCHO. I went there and helped set VACCHO up and helped build all the frameworks and all the partners that we enjoy and Close the Gap. I was at the big table earlier on when we were talking about setting that.

So I want to impress upon the Commissioners that yeah I'm a local fella and a city fella. I'm a footy coach, I've got grand kids, six of them in Cairns, and I miss them dearly. There are also other parts of who I am, which are important to today about just a knowledge of the organisation and part of that includes an honorary Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, which is sort of interesting. That'll do. That's me.

MR MCAVOY SC: Thank you, Michael.

MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: Thanks Alan. Michael Graham, Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta. It's been a hard week since Aunty Fay passed away as part of our

5 Mob, a great matriarch of our people in many different areas. I am married with 10 children. It's a blended family. Some are mine, some are my wife's and some are from other people that we have raised through child protection, but they are all ours and those children have given us 25 grandchildren. So we are quite a big family.

10 I've been a VAHS client ever since VAHS inception. So that's 51 years. All of my children and my wife's children, all of our children have all been clients of VAHS. All of our grandchildren are clients of VAHS. VAHS is more to us than somewhere where we go to see a doctor, it's part of our family and it's also been our learning ground where we go and talk to Elders and we get taught about life and how to live life to its fullest.

15 As I've said before in the previous hearing, you know, I carry many hats as well. Chair of VACCHO, chair of the Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Partnership Forum which is co-chair with Minister Thomas, and also co-chair of Ngaweeyan Maar-oo, which was my last hearing, which also has me co-chairing the Close the Gap Partnership Forum and I also chair the Northern Metropolitan Aboriginal Strategic Governance Group of the DFFH.

20 So there's a - I should also say that that also puts me at the table of the Coalition of Peaks and that's the National Coalition of Peaks and the National Joint Council and on the board of NACCHO. So I sit at a lot of tables and I hear a lot of the stories and I know the - how heart breaking it is to hear many of those stories, and as I said to you last time, you must hear a lot of heart breaking stories and I still think about that quite often because I'm in the game of healing, and I think - I was thinking about this on the way in, about you know, why I do things.

30 For people who know me on Facebook, they see me put up a lot of dad jokes, because I want people to smile. That's my aim. I want people to be happy and smiling. That's why I do what I do. My community has supported me ever since I can remember and VAHS has been a big part of that because it does more than the health, it does the wellbeing, it does the social work as well. It does everything. So that's who I am and I'll leave it at that for now.

35 **MR MCAVOY SC:** Thank you very much. Darren Lovett.

40 **MR DARREN LOVETT:** Yes, I'm Darren Lovett, I'm a proud Gunditjmara man, and like many of these fellas here we are all Gunditjmara people here as well. Just to relay on what Alan had to say, we are all products of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, back in the early days. So remember the very early days when there was very little about what was the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service and generations of our children have all embraced and come on that journey with us.

45 Myself, I was grateful to start work within the community back in the early 80s, in a program called Koorie College, Aboriginal Health Workers program. Alan

Brown was a coordinator there, Dr Bruce McGuinness was the Dean and you had all these lecturers around there, great people, you know. Gary Foley is still around and people like Dennis Walker. These are people that I had sort of the chance to meet in my lifetime.

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From then on, I think everything else kind of, you know you kind of gravitate and you get pulled into your community and I've worked there at Victorian Aboriginal Childcare Agency after Koorie College and then went off and got a law degree. I studied there at the Institute of Koorie Education, at Deakin University. From then on I've just been around a bit, never got into sort of fully practice because I think I just went back to sort of help teach there at Koorie College - not Koorie College - Institute of Koorie Education. But I think part of my journey is also too, that we always sort of seem to fall back and now I'm in this area, for the last getting on to six years now, working here at Victorian Aboriginal Health Service as the manager of Family Counselling Services. That's me, in a nutshell.

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MR MCAVOY SC: Thank you very much. And Gavin Brown.

MR GAVIN BROWN: Thank you. Gavin Brown, I'm a Gunditjmara also. And I'm the chief operations officer at VAHS and I have been back at VAHS for the last seven years, in this role or similar roles. I did, like everybody else, I am still in Fitzroy, grew up in Fitzroy. I am grateful, very grateful for the upbringing we had in Fitzroy with all our old people, living at home before all the services were around in the 60s and things like that. We are quite blessed with that education we got at the time and it certainly holds us in good stead now. So I would like to acknowledge all the old people who gave us the values that we carry today.

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I did start working at the health service at the age of 15. I was, like Michael, a client since day one. But I left school and went to VAHS as a dental nurse at the age of 15. And what that did for me, the health service and community control and all the people around us was it allowed me to see a future for myself. I'm so grateful for that as well. At that point I decided I wanted to get into management, I wanted to lead organisations in this space, and I was 15 at the time. And by the time I was 25 I became a CEO of, it was VASA at the time but Community-Controlled Organisations and I've worked in that space, in management CEO level for over 30 years.

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There's a lot of volume in that, in different sectors, in Native Title, in New South Wales Land Councils, at the gym for a while and at VASA and I was senior manager at the Advancement League. So I'm really pleased to bring my skills back to VAHS after that journey. A lot of involvement at State and national level for different reasons and all I do now as chief operations officer, I sit on one board which is the Weeroona Trust Cemetery Board, and all my time is dedicated to building VAHS, to ensure we are building a future and looking after our people as per our values.

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So that's me, in a nutshell. I do have a large family. I have 14 grandchildren, so we have a lot to do and, you know, we want to still continue to instil these values in our kids and if people get to see a future like I was fortunate enough to do, I think that's a wonderful thing. I'll leave it there for the moment as well.

5

MR MCAVOY SC: Thank you very much. I understand that you would like to assist the Commissioners with some discussion about the history of VAHS. Who will lead that discussion?

10 **MR MICHAEL GRAHAM:** I will start with an overall one and then Alan will start the story.

MR MCAVOY SC: Thank you.

15 **MR MICHAEL GRAHAM:** I think listening to some of the hearings that you have already heard and thinking about my previous hearing was we talk about the system failures, process failures and everything like that, and we don't actually see ourselves as people in that system anywhere, and, you know, it got me thinking about, and I remember Commissioner Lovett, you asked about where is a good
20 place where we've actually been supported well and been able to do something and I mentioned that COVID was probably the one and only time that I could think of where we were resourced adequately and was able to do a great job.

It got me thinking more about where are our good news stories and, you know,
25 here I was working in probably one of the biggest good news stories, the adversity that our people had to face before VAHS was set up. We didn't belong anywhere. We weren't being serviced. You know, there was a whole lot of issues that our people were facing at the time. And so in the way that I've been taught over many years through story-telling and I think probably the best lesson I got from my
30 mum was to be respectful and to listen and learn and I still do that today.

I'm still learning but I thought that this was a great opportunity to come in and talk about our people who up against everything, government don't, we don't fit in government systems, we've got casting this dark shadow over us all the time but
35 we're still here, and one of the reasons why we're still here is because of organisations like VAHS. And so I thought I wanted to come in and share that story of VAHS from its creation to where we're at today.

Alan is sort of our walking library. He's a bit of a hoarder of all of our documents.
40 And he's working on getting that digitised at the nomen which will be great for all of our Mob going forward but I've asked Alan to come in and share that story with the rest of us.

45 **MR MCAVOY SC:** You would like to move to the PowerPoint presentation?

MR ALAN BROWN: Yeah, if we could do that.

MR MCAVOY SC: I'll just arrange that. Thank you. You can indicate when you want to -

MR ALAN BROWN: How do I -

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MR MCAVOY SC: Next slide.

MR ALAN BROWN: Yeah, this is part of a PowerPoint that we use, it's a combination of several PowerPoints but fit-for-purpose today. Part of our presentations that we all do is we've got inductions for staff and a lot of that is for our own Koori staff who come in, who are new to the organisation of course, but new to the VAHS story. But it's also for non-Aboriginal people who really don't know much about Aboriginal people at all, doctors and psychiatrists and all that.

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15 So that's a bit of a combination of all that. One of the key messages about VAHS today is we make a difference and we save lives and that's what we do. And there's stacks of evidence about that. I'm sure that's available to the Commission when youse need it. But anecdotally, the things that we do, the stories that people tell us, the engagement we have with community, the feedback, consultation, it's
20 all about, "Thank you, you've made a difference."

People have said to us, "You have saved my life" and that is just some of the most - that's just a game changer, because we work in a tough environment. The staff have high expectations from community. There's challenges all the time but we
25 get through it, and like I said, simply make a difference. But thank you, Sue-Anne, for that acknowledgement, Welcome to Country. VAHS is always respectful of Traditional Owners. We do have a position about this is Wurundjeri land, people of Kulin Nations, never ceded and we want to honour and respect that. That's part of the health journey for us and I guess for Wurundjeri people as
30 well. We will go to the next part.

MR MCAVOY SC: Just before you go any further, I just need to check whether you are happy to take questions from the Commissioners as we go along through the slide show.

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MR ALAN BROWN: Yeah, I am. And I'm sure these fellas here, if you want to chip in at any time as well. I just don't want to do it solo. But, yeah -

MR MCAVOY SC: Please, continue.

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MR ALAN BROWN: All right. Okay, that's, that bottom photo there, the building on the corner, that's - Mick might elaborate about this later on but we actually own that building. One of the good things about the health service in terms of starting to own things, own assets and all that type of thing but we'll go to
45 the next slide. Who we are. We'll go to the next slide.

Okay. Before we get into the nuts and bolts about the VAHS existence, one of the important mentions about VAHS is the core of who we are is about what we are, and like we're 51 years old this year and we are second oldest Aboriginal organisation in Victoria, second oldest Aboriginal organisation, Aboriginal Health Service in the country. Started from humble beginnings at 229 Gertrude Street. You can almost see the building from here. It's quite unique. Real humble beginnings, volunteers, you know, decided that we needed to do things different. But one of the core principles about VAHS is our model of service delivery and it's embedded in our history.

10 It's not just made up, some new thing. It was done right from the very beginning. The group of people that met in Fitzroy said, "We need an Aboriginal health service. We have to do something" decided it had to be done under the principal core community control. And the Commissioners might hear that from time to time in here and it gets bandied around our community. I think it's over theorised, I think it's over thought. I've seen it work at VAHS and other places, and it's basically Aboriginal people controlling Aboriginal affairs.

20 It's Aboriginal people running a health business. It's us expressing our self-determination and that's what community control is and the model we do it is, of course, with a registered body and we formed a board and we vote and we run the place. That's the local community. I mean that's the model but community control is also more than that. It has depth and it has integrity and it has culture connected to it and it has community connected to it. That's one of the key principles about VAHS.

30 I think it's best summed up by when we talk about new doctors coming in, we ask them "When you see an Aboriginal person what are you looking at?" And you know, they say "Aboriginal person" we say, "No, what are you really looking at? What do you think you're dealing with? Do you see someone who's given up or do you see someone who is resilient? Do you see someone who is strong willed or somebody that wants to put their hand out?" And they sort of - we want to shift their relationship with patients to one where there is a connection here and the person - the person that they are seeing is one of the owners of the organisation.

35 The patient is one of the owners. That's what community control represents. They don't own the bricks and mortar, technically we do, I guess but morally they're the owners and that's what community control is, where everybody is a stakeholder in VAHS. Let's go to the next slide.

40 One of the other unique core principles about VAHS is our definition of health. We're more than just a medical clinic. There are lots of good medical clinics around where doctors are employed and they run a great place and you can go there and you can get patched up. But then you've got to be sent out to the real world and I guess that's a difference in VAHS in terms of our history and our philosophy is that our definition of health is based on more than just a medical model.

Very early on we realised that what the people that built VAHS realised earlier on we have to bring our own culture constructs into our health service, the things that are important to us like family and community and culture and land, and rights and principles. But we also do need to employ doctors and nurses and psychiatrists. We need to grab the best of the western medical model and bring them into our world and get them to work for us to help improve our health status.

So that basically encompasses the VAHS definition of health, where it's a bit more than just that clinical model. Let's go to the next one. Okay. That photo you see up there, that's Doug Nicholls Sunday School in Fitzroy. You might recognise some of the families there, but I think it's about VAHS's like other Aboriginal organisations have their roots in Fitzroy, because our community was based in Fitzroy from early on.

I think one of the important messages on that slide where we say, "Aboriginal people have a long history in Fitzroy." Yes, "Aboriginal Fitz was awash with poverty, discrimination, unemployment and homelessness." Yes, tough times, you know. But the other part of that picture and that story is the things that we've heard from people who lived them times and what about - and every time they tell you about living in Fitzroy, growing up in them tough times, they've got a smile on their face. You know because there's lots of love. There was love, there was connectedness. There was sharing, there was caring, there was safety.

You come from outside of Melbourne, outside of Fitzroy, you ended up in Fitzroy. And part of that is - so there was joy and happiness as well despite the tough times, which is part of the resilience of metropolitan - of us. One of the key factors to that is the caring, and you will note that the VAHS motto is caring for community. So it wasn't some PR term. It wasn't some marketing company that put that up for us. Caring for community is embedded in our history in Fitzroy and embedded in who we are. It actually is part of what VAHS is. Can we go to the next one, please?

Okay, you might recognise some of the people there. I did need to let the Commissioners know there might be photos of people that you know and people that have passed away. So I do apologise.

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Can I just add that I took that photo by the way?

MR ALAN BROWN: There's (indistinct) so we should name them and that's at (indistinct) gardens, up from here. Our health in the 70s was an international embarrassment, a national disaster, you know, and in Melbourne, and in big city Fitzroy. I mean, our health status was deplorable. And people were dying, you know, the Close the Gap was 22 years younger than the rest of the country. Despite, you know, like less than a kilometre from this photo was St Vincent's hospital. That's an indictment on the health system. I know we didn't want to get to that, but the health system - I mean, St Vincent's might have been on the moon

in terms of delivery and what it was going to do for us in Fitzroy where our community was located.

5 Not far from there was the Royal Women's and the Royal Children's and the Mercy. We are/ were in one of the best health precincts possibly in Australia, maybe the rest of the world and we were dying 22 years younger. That's how life was in the 70s. And that's why people organised and that's why people met and decided that we needed to do something about it. Let's go to the next slide.

10 Like I said, we don't talk about the advanced health philosophy without connection to Country and connection to land, and VAHS is a political organisation. The decisions that VAHS makes are political. You know, we've done submissions to the Human Rights Equal Opportunity Commission, we have done submissions to the Deaths in Custody Royal Commission. We've been there, done all that and
15 there is a clear connection between the history of this organisation and the political advocacy of our community.

They are hand in glove, they go together. You don't separate our health status from our other wellbeing issues, which we have. A good story about that photo,
20 that was the lead up into the Bi-Centennial Games protest, whenever that was, but I love this photo because I can see my brother there, Anthony. I see my other brother there, Gavin leading the march, but they are all VAHS staff.

You see (indistinct) has still got her nurse's uniform on. What are they doing
25 leading a land rights march? Shouldn't they be in the clinic? Well, we reckon that's just as important, when you talk about the history of this organisation and part of our brief is that is just as critical, just as important for us to be in that at the frontline than at the frontline at the medical clinic as well. Let's go to the next slide.

30 And the issue about land rights is a clear connection. There is a paper that we'll provide to the Commission. It's called Land Rights Health and Sovereignty. We wrote this 40 years ago. You know, there was some - Mick mentioned the historical stuff, there are some diamonds in the rough in terms of some of the
35 position papers that VAHS has developed in terms of our development of our philosophy, which makes us a critical organisation in terms of contemporary Aboriginal history.

40 Land rights connection to Country. The position on VAHS is, "Pay the rent, you're on Aboriginal land and sovereignty was never ceded." That is so critical to the health and wellbeing of our people that that, not negotiable strong vision is at the core of Aboriginal people's wellbeing. Next one, please.

45 That is our position on health and wellbeing. It's one of the unique positions that VAHS has in terms of how do we approach health. It talks about a holistic approach to our wellbeing and what makes us different than the western model. So in 1973 people that, you know, put our organisation together had some strong

cultural connections and strong philosophies about how to approach and build a health model and influence the rest of the country, influence the delivery of health services to non-Aboriginal people later on.

5 We know the stories about good ideas that other health services have, the mainstream services, and we just look at them and smile and say "That's not a bad idea" because you know we've been sort of doing it for a while. Let's go to the next slide.

10 Okay. Part of our culture is to respect and honour where we come from, and particularly for Victorian Aboriginal communities. And, look, five significant people who are so important in the fabric of who we are as Victorian Aboriginal people. Just their advocacy and their leadership is extraordinary. And we honour that and the things that they - and we have got our own who possibly followed
15 them, Aunty Alma Thorpe, our administrator, you know, came down, moved down from the bush, seven kids, single mum. Worked for nothing. And worked - and would work in a hotel at night to sort of get by. McGuinness our chairperson for a long time, quite often called the architect of community control, just a political influencer, who was a game changer as well. Jim Berg was involved
20 early days for us. Reg Blow was our first president.

Edna Brown was our first member. We've got - I'm not sure - 400 members, but Nan was our first member and I sort of found her membership form and all that type of thing. So - but Nan is famously known for setting up the funeral service
25 and just stepping up to the plate and taking on to do that when no one else would, sort of thing and to ensure that people were buried with dignity.

Anyway, so this is about VAHS history not just being transported into time and then it all happened. I mean, there's stuff that precedes us and there's people and
30 energy and things that happen, where that moment in time, it was right for us to be able to do what we needed to do. And now we're part of the current sort of thing that's going on. Hopefully one day people will say the same sort of things about that gang of four that are sitting up there. The next slide.

35 I don't know, I was pretty young in 1973, I think I was about 15. But I don't know what Australia was like, but it wasn't good for Aboriginal people in terms of racism and treatment of us, and how our rights were expressed. So a group of local community people got together and said, "Enough is enough. We are dying too young, we've got to do something about it", and they had community meetings
40 and we've got all the minutes of 1973.

There were eight or nine meetings which happened. We've got the minutes, quite - we'll possibly share them with the Commission, if you like, and extraordinary conversations were going on. And the people and the names and the families that
45 were represented and a clear direction about we want to have our own health service and how that was formed and discussed. And the decisions that were made, even back then. The vision of VAHS back then, the people, you know, like

I reckon the people back are courageous to step up under adversity from the rest of the country, you know our rights, how dare you set up an Aboriginal Health Service, how dare you why don't you go up the road, you have got a big hospital up there. The denial of us to have our right, our own health service and this group
 5 to say "Hey, we are going to do it" but then to have the vision to be able to help other communities in Victoria.

In the minutes we've got some of our doctors, despite our need in Melbourne in Fitzroy, we sent doctors to Rumbalara and help, at the site there, and a doctor
 10 would drive up and come back. We sent doctors down to Warrnambool, despite we needed them here. So there was that caring thing.

There's a conversation with Nessie who is a fantastic lady from Gippsland on the National Aboriginal Congress who came to Melbourne and she wanted a health
 15 service. They wanted to set up a health service in Bairnsdale and VAHS "loaned", I think is the right word, that committee \$2,000 to - so they could employ a nurse. So that's the type of things that VAHS did as well, and part of the history. So it was, like I said - go to the next slide.

20 There was a group of extraordinary people doing extraordinary things. I might move this on pretty quickly. All right. I'll finish on this, these two slides. The early days was on health but the key principle about VAHS is the rights of Aboriginal people to run our own health service. It's a core fundamental principle about our right to determine our own health journey, our right to be as patients, to
 25 our own service and that's embodied in all the human rights charters all around the world.

But the good old people from Fitzroy, they were talking this in 1973, before it became popular. You know, the group of people that we all know and the families
 30 and groups that we engage with, the core principle of our VAHS was to be, to have no blinkers, to be creative - we will go to the next slide and then I'll finish, Mick. The next one, I think. The next one.

It's about the principles about our wellbeing. This slide talks about some of the
 35 fundamental conditions about health, what you need to be a healthy person or a healthy family. And VAHS embraced that before it became part of the language. And took off the blinkers and said, "What else do we need to do in our community to ensure that we get to that? What are we doing about physical activity and sport? Let's help set up the Fitzroy stars youth club, let's get the footy club going." Simple things like that. "What are we doing about babies? Under-
 40 fives club? What about kinder? All right. What about we help the (indistinct)? "

"What are we doing about education? Let's build our own workforce, good idea. Let's get a Koorie College going and let's run a health education program. What
 45 are we doing about burial of our people? Yeah, let's help Edna, let's help Nan raise raffle money and bury people. Let's get Weeroona, our cemetery. What are

we doing about art and craft? Let's set up the workshop in Fitzroy. What are we doing about homeless men? Let's set up the George Wright shelter?"

5 "What are we doing with aged care? Let's go and talk to Aunty Iris and Fay and help set up ACES." I think what I want to finish on is VAHS's core business is primary healthcare and that's part of our history, that's part of our constructs that come from history and community but it's also about the holistic approach to health. Thank you. I'll leave that there.

10 **MR MCAVOY SC:** I might just ask the other panellists if they've got anything that they want to add to that short piece?

15 **MR MICHAEL GRAHAM:** I might just start with a bit of an overview. I hear this quite often, and I still get goose bumps when I hear it because I know all the hard work that has been put in and it talks about my family, my friends and I see me in that, which is different to outside of Aboriginal organisations.

20 I just wanted to highlight that when we were colonised, invaded, whatever you want to call it and everybody calls it different things, our systems were taken away from us. Our language was taken away, we weren't allowed to speak our language. We weren't allowed to do song and dance. We weren't allowed, all of our systems they tried to take them away from us, they sent us off to missions and said, "Don't practise your culture, don't do this, don't do that." And the people who congregated to Fitzroy said, "If we don't do something, we're gonna die off.
25 We've got to change something."

30 So we had our old systems and then there was the new systems. So they brought them together and that's how we ended up with the health service and legal service and all of that. Because we were able to bring our system into the contemporary system at the time, adjust to the environment that was around us. It's no different to what we have done for tens of thousands of years. Depending on the seasons we adjust to the environment. So this was the environment we was living in and I mean, courageous. Can you just imagine going from people not even
35 recognising that you're walking down the street and all of a sudden you are setting up these constructs?

40 I mean, I can only imagine people were, you know, basically throwing rocks at people kind of thing, you know, not physically but like, "Who do these people think they are? We are trying to get rid of you, like you don't exist here but here you are, you've adjusted to the environment and you are creating all of these constructs." And as is our way, we didn't just look after the Mob just in Fitzroy, okay. "What do youse need in other areas, because we will help out and we will put ourselves at a strain to do that."

45 I'll finish on this bit with one more thing. Gavin and I was in a meeting in Queensland two years ago, I think it was, and there was a lot of the urban health services there. And there was Uncle Les and Aunty Mary and that from Brisbane

ATSICHS. Brisbane is the equivalent to VAHS down here. And when we were finishing I did say to them, I said, "Look, I really want to thank you for having us here and we really appreciated it." The Elders said, "Michael, it's reciprocal because when we were starting up Brisbane, it was VAHS who sent the equipment up to help us get started." So it wasn't just happening in Victoria, it was across the Nation.

Do you know how many people from across the country? "How are you doing this? What is your system? What's your process?" The whole thing, "What's your model?". VAHS is so much bigger than just Fitzroy, it's unbelievable and I'm still learning how much influence we have had through NAO, which became NACCHO and a whole range of other things. I mean, Alan could sit here and talk to you for three or four days about the history and what we've done, but I won't allow him to because we don't have that much time.

We even do this kind of stuff with our directors every couple of years and most of them know the story, but they just love to hear it. It brings back that purpose, that love, that feeling of what we are here for, but I will pass it on to any of the others that would like to add to that.

MR GAVIN BROWN: I just want to add one thing at this point, Michael, and it's about the impact of the Aboriginal community-controlled health movement, just like here in Fitzroy. I just want to elaborate that. VAHS was second in the country after Redfern. We share an anniversary of quite a few other ACCOs, Alice Springs Congress, Brisbane, like Michael said and Perth. You know, at that time there was only one or two or three or four. I guess after 51 years now there's over 150, I'd say 150 ACCOs or medical services in local communities across Australia. And I know that, I think there's 28 in Victoria, Michael. So numbers are fairly close and I know that like Mick said VAHS was influential in all that, in all that growth.

I know it's been changed through government and things ebb and flow and all that, but essentially that whole Aboriginal controlled health movement has had a really big impact on the survival of our people post colonisation and I think that's really important to consider. Because it has been one of the biggest movements in that space and it's still not enough. You know, the talk was always, the discussion was about putting a health service in every community so they could have their own community health service so they could determine their own health needs.

So that's always an ongoing struggle, I guess, in that respect but alongside everything else that was said, the growth in that area has been phenomenal, that's a hard word to say when you are on live but I got it out and I just think that needs to be recognised for those efforts of all those people and all the people that now work in the Aboriginal health sector, you know. So it's been, like I said, one of the best movements and has one of the biggest impact post colonisation.

MR ALAN BROWN: One of the - and so there is resilience and strength in our community. It (indistinct) the service going. But - and the environment is a lot different now than it was in 1973 or 1983, or 1993. Government were not supportive of Aboriginal community-controlled health services and there was - it
 5 was challenged. It was under-resourced. Never seen as a proper health system, a health service. And there was all types of barriers and influences, and roadblocks put to progress of Aboriginal community-controlled health services by government.

10 And sometimes we had to step outside the government realm and go for resources philanthropic. Koorie College for the first two years was funded by the (indistinct) Foundation, because we couldn't get funding from - they didn't believe in our vision. And after we graduated 80 health workers in two years, they said, "That's not too bad, we'd like to fund that." And, you know, sometimes it's what
 15 you get, hey, because that changes stuff.

The other interesting challenge about that is perceptions of what influences decision-makers. And I can remember I was a Victorian representative on the National Aboriginal Health Council and that was an advisory group to the
 20 Minister for Aboriginal Health, Michael Wooldridge who was the member for Kooyong, I think. He was the Minister for Health, and I was his chair of one of his subcommittees on the workforce. I went to see him about that. We talked about workforce stuff and I said, "Whilst you are there, you've got to advocate, hey, you've got a Minister in the room, you've push him a bit."

25 I said, "Mate, you've got to put resources, you've got to fund Aboriginal resources, we need you to invest in what we do." He looked and he said to me, "Alan, there are no votes in Aboriginal health. There are no votes in Aboriginal health." This is a Minister of the Crown, the Minister for Health telling me that we didn't matter.
 30 And it was either in the government cabinet or it was either white Australia doesn't support Aboriginal health, but the point was there were no votes there. There's no support and it's like a dagger in your heart. You know, so that was tough. But I went back and I said, "Thank you for that, Michael, appreciate your honesty". And we went back and what we had to do was we had to change our strategy,
 35 because back in the day, we played the man a bit.

You took on the person across the table and you advocated for rights and self-determination, but we - what NACCHO did and VAHS is that we started to build our case, and build our evidence and become a bit - we became more
 40 evidence-based in terms of what we needed and that type of thing. But I'll never forget Michael Wooldridge mentioned that to me.

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Can you repeat what year that was, whereabouts?

45 **MR ALAN BROWN:** He was the Minister for Health. I don't know the exact -

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: 80s? 90s? What do you think?

MR ALAN BROWN: I reckon it was 80s.

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Not too long ago, really.

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MR ALAN BROWN: Yeah and it made me wonder what influences decision-making, resources and all the things that come from that. And in the end it felt like, you know, nobody supports what you want to do. I mean, despite the fact that we were dying 20 years younger than the rest of the country, we didn't matter and it's heart breaking. It's sad, but we had to change minds very quickly.

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COMMISSIONER WALTER: Do you think things have changed or is there still an under current of, "You don't really matter"?

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MR ALAN BROWN: I think we are part of the landscape now. I think we are embedded in it. There was a time when we always felt vulnerable. Don't muck up or they'll shut you down. You know, and there's always that fear of two Aboriginal organisations, I guess, not just VAHS that we are at the beck and call of powers elsewhere. But I like - I want to be cup half full and say that we are part - we are in a stronger position now.

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MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: Yeah, I think - I want to say that - I want to stay positive and say that we are getting listened to more, but listened to doesn't always equate to actions. And some of the actions that do come in, it's sort of drip-fed. You know, we're talking about closing these gaps, you know, by 2031. It's not very far away and I know as I'm getting older that the years seem to go quicker. But we're not going to close the gap by 2031. It's just not going to happen. There's no real investment going into health and wellbeing. You know, it's just dribs and drabs.

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It does scare me to think that. And I've said it before, I get quite angry the fact that I have to go and hear my children in another 10, 20 years talking about the same story that my mum was talking about 20 years ago. And that's - it's angry - it's anger inside and - but, you know, it's a different environment in the fact that there's less of the aggressive fighting, and it's more that evidence base that we're using and we're slowly getting shifts within departments. You know, just the fact that they are actually sitting at the table with us and listening, well that's a good thing.

35

You know, I was just thinking before, because I can see the picture of the Gertrude Street building on Alan's slide there. VAHS has multiple sites and Gavin will touch on that a bit more. Up until this time yesterday morning, or this time yesterday, we only own one building, and we've got all these sites delivering services. Late yesterday, I got a letter from Minister Hutchins to say that they have released the mortgage on one of our other buildings and now we have two buildings. I think we got five or six sites going at the moment, but, you know, the

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Gertrude Street building still sits as a peppercorn lease, it's not just VAHS history, but it's in peppercorn lease.

5 The Nicholson Street building is a real weird one. We actually own the building, but the land belongs to the Department of Education. None of these things make sense to me, but we did buy Plenty Road ourselves, which was great. We're leasing out our other sites and everywhere else, you know, commercial leases. We keep asking, you know, "Can we get some ownership of this kind of stuff? Can you help us with some capital so we can buy something?" And me and Gavin
10 were working really hard on it last year and both State and Commonwealth say, "If you have got some land we can help you to build or work on that land."

15 So I said, "So technically what you are telling me is if I had a shack sitting on a paddock, you would help me to fix that shack". "Technically yes, but you have got no land." Where are we going to buy land from, what money? We have had to be innovative, we are working on some other things. But it's all about us doing all the hard work and being innovative and not getting the support from the government who is supposed to be looking after its citizens.

20 So it's a long answer to what you're asking. I do feel like it's less of that fighting and more of trying to negotiate, which we're not winning the battle too much but we're getting somewhere.

25 **COMMISSIONER HUNTER:** Gertrude Street, you opened that in 1937?

MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: Well, the original building, Gavin can touch on, he likes to tell this story.

30 **COMMISSIONER HUNTER:** But are you still under a peppercorn lease? The other one that you're currently in on Nicholson, how long have you been in there?

MR ALAN BROWN: 1993.

35 **MR GAVIN BROWN:** Just a correction on that. The very first one was down, across the road there from the -

MR ALAN BROWN: Yeah. 229. Yeah.

40 **MR GAVIN BROWN:** 229.

MR ALAN BROWN: That was a private rental.

45 **MR GAVIN BROWN:** That was a private rental. Just a bit of historical fact on that one there too, because what came out of that was the dental service as well, but I think before that, it was the legal service, which Jim Berg helped set up. So what it was is you have this kind of, walk in, sort of revolving door, you know. You go in there and you get your health and you go and see someone about your

legal matters. But it did start off that way and as it did, it just shows the, just the amount of work that our community, our foundation members, our Elders have, you know, have got from those earlier. And Bruce McGuinness used to say we came from humble beginnings because he says we are survivors and we're
 5 fighters. Therefore, you know, it's only just that because that - where we see now is a whole generation of even like with leadership, like with Michael, and all the other leaderships in the past have always been doing the same fight.

10 However, we have still got to fight there. They are still trying to get the fundings to look after our communities. Now, it's interesting fact, isn't it, to say for me, I think what was it - you know, what are we talking about, 1980s, you know, the mortality rate of an Aboriginal male around about 1980s was around about 40 years of age. So, now I'm kicking on a bit. I'm getting on to 63 so that means now, what's my mortality rate now? Well, it means that because of what we have
 15 within our services, that keeps us going and sort of making us, you know, live longer.

But it's really interesting when you sort of, when I hear Alan sort of speak and particularly too with all the photographs and everything, and I can picture each
 20 part of that journey, that's like I was there. I kind of joke like Forrest Gump, he was there every time something important happened within history. But it's like that. You kind of like, I can sit back and just see how vastly we have grown. So sort of from those sort of early days there, when you only had about sort of one doctor that was on board. Now we have got about, how many Michael?

25 **MR MICHAEL GRAHAM:** 27. Yeah (indistinct).

MR GAVIN BROWN: 27. And the staff there, you know, they were all volunteer staff at the time, you know. Talking about working for the dole, they
 30 were working for the dole back then and here we are now, over 300 staff and still growing to capacity, only because we're still trying to find more services out there, you know, to give to our community. And only just recently now, got one out there in the western suburbs, which is a community that has been vastly missed out on a lot of services. VAHS has the vision. Sometimes it's - sorry. Just one
 35 more, sometimes it just wanders there. When you actually see something that actually works and what is really positive just have a look at that sort of 50 odd years of history there with VAHS.

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Can I ask one more? Just around, we haven't
 40 touched upon it too much, but societal pushback around when you were advocating and when the community was advocating to set these - the health service up. What was the societal view of our people at that point in time? We have heard about politicians saying there's no votes, but more broadly in society, surely there would have been push back in the community around wanting
 45 Aboriginal services in, "Not in my backyard" type of thing?

MR DARREN LOVETT: Can I - when it first started there were first generations, migrants and that, it was quite communal because of poverty and things like that. So there wasn't really that much push and resistance. And I dare say that in the 80s we were such a strong community that we almost lived
5 sovereign. So the real pushback was from government and things like that. You know, we had our footy clubs, we had everything set up and we didn't really step out of our circle that far in that respect. So I generally - I don't think there was that much. I didn't experience it, Travis. Others might. I know people had views with their friends and like that, but generally that didn't come to later from my
10 experience.

So I felt like that we were just really strong as a people and we didn't move too far out of those circles to be honest. So we weren't - and we had good leaders who really didn't expose us to it. So if that was taken on, it was taken on by leaders.
15 So we were protected a lot in that sense. I just want to come back to your question, if you don't mind for a minute.

I just want to reaffirm 1979 we moved into - it is a long-term lease, peppercorn lease that building is iconic, because it was one of our strongest periods, Gertrude
20 Street. Yes, it's unusual. We moved there '93, and the land is still owned by the Crown as well. So it doesn't give us real great security on those buildings and I think that's something we have always tried to address, but we haven't been able to. With everything else we haven't been able to bed that down. But in terms of an organisation, yes, we would love to have those as freehold title to build and
25 secure our services. It's an ongoing discussion though, as you know.

COMMISSIONER HUNTER: I just want to point out with Gertrude Street really quickly, that's where we first lot of hearings. Aunty Fay gave her evidence and we must thank you for the work you put in to allow us to do that.
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MR DARREN LOVETT: Yeah. That was our pleasure.

COMMISSIONER HUNTER: And so that's - that opened our hearings as well. That shows you that it's in the history of a lot more than just -
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MR DARREN LOVETT: Absolutely, I agree.

MR ALAN BROWN: Trav, some of the push back was also institutional. We were allowed to be our own little community in Fitzroy and out of sight, out of
40 mind type of thing, which Gavin was referring to. "Knock yourselves out, go and look after yourselves." But as our focus became bigger, as it became more evident that this is a national disgrace, the health status of Aboriginal people, more people wanted to get involved and the health system wanted to be involved and they started talking to us about partnerships and relationships. All of a sudden, they
45 wanted to be our friends, but it was conditional.

The pushback was not on our terms. Now, so - and early days them challenges were, "Hey, we own Aboriginal health. This is our business. We are the experts in our business. We didn't create the problems, but we know the solutions." But the pushback was coming from like credible hospitals and health institutions and government departments about we will never - it took a long time to be the owner of the partnership. Like, VAHS has got a position that we have to own the partnership, like fifty-fifty doesn't cut it. It has got to be like, "You want to enter into our world, we have to own that relationship because we are the experts." So, but there was pushback earlier, mate.

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COMMISSIONER LOVETT: I'm thinking more broadly around the political movement of the people. You have the Stolen Gens. You have a whole heap of, kind of, you know, our people being transient and having to move around, and so forth, so yeah.

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MR DARREN LOVETT: Yeah. To your question there, Travis, about societal. So where you look at - I mean, sort of, what was really evidence of it there too, more recently with the boys. So, you know, back then '67 referendum to vote, this time around, there's still a lot of goodwill there from non-Aboriginal people there wanting us Mob to really get up there and have a perfect say. But to my mind I was apprehensive about it, because I, to my - I hate it when I was right, that Australia wasn't ready for that yet. Because it just showed because the majority of non-Aboriginal people, they voted for Aboriginal not to be enshrined in their constitution. And this is the - and we talk about it now and again.

20

25 Institutionalised, systemic and, therefore, this is the constant grind that we have to keep going through time and time again.

Hopefully in my life time, which is, well, I'm getting on 63 now and I'm thinking now where is my mortality rate. Is it going to still keep going and I live to 80?

30

You know, who knows. In my lifetime I would like to see something that really believes that there is that sort of - not that sort of whole back from what we get from the own funding sources and from right across everything within Aboriginal affairs, but also too, you know, we're talking about land rights and we are talking about Treaty and we're talking about this. Even the Yoorrook truth-telling, you know, fantastic because we are actually able to get out there and we can express that rather than someone in their own confines and saying that's where we are.

35

But as I said, I just like to know that we're, you know, we are trying to do the best we can.

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MR MCAVOY SC: Chair, without wishing to cut off any questions that the Commissioners might have of this panel, I note that we are sitting, essentially two hours and we have now been sitting for almost an hour and a half and perhaps it is a suitable time to take a five-minute break.

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CHAIR: A five-minute break, is that okay. Thank you. We will resume in five minutes. You want to say 1 o'clock?

MR MCAVOY SC: That's suitable, thank you, Chair.

<THE HEARING ADJOURNED AT 12.52 PM

5 **<THE HEARING RESUMED AT 1.05 PM**

CHAIR: Counsel, the sitting has resumed.

10 **MR MCAVOY SC:** Thank you, Chair. I just want to ask a question perhaps first
of Alan and then any comments from any of the other panel members. You've
talked about the connection between the VAHS health system and the, or VAHS
as an organisation and the land rights movement. I just wonder whether you are
able to comment about the ability of First Peoples in Victoria to attain full,
15 well-rounded health in the absence of through justice and reckoning. I mean,
having - carrying that burden of injustice and the matters that this Commission are
dealing with, how much does that impede a person, and your clients achieving
their full health?

20 **MR MICHAEL GRAHAM:** Just before you start and Alan answers just before
the break, I want to acknowledge that two of our directors have come into the
room and they themselves have been staunch members, directors, workers for
VAHS for many years as well. So I just wanted to acknowledge that before we
speak.

25 **MR MCAVOY SC:** Can you, for the record, tell us who the directors are?

MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: Tony McCartney and Shelly Williams.

30 **MR MCAVOY SC:** No doubt the Commissioners will welcome them. Alan?

MR ALAN BROWN: Thank you for that question. When you look at the
purpose of VAHS and what we do, it's not just a doctor-led health clinic, that's
where our health change will happen. The primary health care clinic is one part of
a wellbeing package, I think, for an individual or family or for a community. So
35 when we talk about wellbeing at VAHS, we talk about physical wellbeing, cultural
wellbeing, and importantly spiritual wellbeing. They're three wellbeing factors,
and land and connection to Country is a critical part of a person's spiritual and
cultural make-up.

40 So whilst we can do our, whatever we can do to help a person with the various
medical models that we have to get to a status of a physical wellbeing, there is
always other wellbeing connectiveness that's happening in terms of the total
wellbeing environment and connection to Country is important to that. So that's
critical in terms of a VAHS approach. That's why we say, "Pay the rent, you're on
45 Aboriginal land. Sovereignty never ceded." Because part of that wellbeing is
about the right to own that and to - it embodies your health wellbeing when you
can live your sovereignty, Gavin mentioned before, and that you can be part of

that struggle. I mean, part of the struggle is sometimes a healthy thing in terms of it's an activity, it's a journey that you're on.

MR MCAVOY SC: Would anybody else like to comment on that?

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MR DARREN LOVETT: If you - I will just try and phrase it like this. If you looked at what an Aboriginal Utopian society would look like today, it would involve land and our connection. And I think until that is embedded in society, I think we're not going to have balance and we are always going to struggle.

10 I almost feel like we are floating. I almost feel like we're a surviving race and we want better, we deserve better. So I think it's important that it's recognised and the health of land as well, that it's embedded into our fabric of society and I think that is what it looks like.

15 From an operational point of view, from health, a totally different perspective is it gives us an ability to respond to things we can't deal with right now. We are sending people to hospitals to get treatment when we should be sending them back on Country and to places we have instilled in our secure, you know, in our security, so that we can actually respond to the needs of our people and prevent
20 a lot of these things that are occurring.

So it's sort of two-fold for me. It's very much ideological as well, but it's as well it is meaningful in the sense that it does heal people and at the moment we don't have that in our construct. So however that looks like or is embedded I think it's
25 really, really important and we won't achieve that Utopian area until we have got that type of thing.

MR MCAVOY SC: Did you want to say something else, Alan?

30 **MR ALAN BROWN:** Yes. In 1979 Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser mentioned Treaty, he went public about Treaty and we have a press statement from 1979 where the chairman, our chairman, Bruce McGuinness issued a press statement wanting to meet, wanting VAHS to meet with the Prime Minister, as you do, to talk about these conversations about Treaty. And VAHS said then, "We support
35 Treaty and we support the concept about what Treaty can bring" and that's six years after we started. So that's why in the early beginnings of VAHS we were about grasping the bigger picture items which embodied our wellbeing, but - and in that press statement, we talk about why is Treaty and the concept about justice around that important for the wellbeing of Aboriginal people and part of that is
40 recognition of Country and all that brings.

MR MCAVOY SC: So that expression of the importance of Treaty to wellbeing from Bruce McGuinness at the early part of VAHS history remains just as important today?

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MR ALAN BROWN: Absolutely. Absolutely. Still relevant. I'm fairly confident that those types of conversations are still happening, happening around

the leadership in VAHS and the conversations about the current environment of Victoria. It's all relevant. But I think the important thing is that it is part of our wellbeing package.

5 **MR MCAVOY SC:** And I think in his earlier statements, Michael may have said as much, but from VAHS perspective as a health service provider, does the process of truth telling that this Commission has been engaged in provide any health benefits for members of the community, your clients?

10 **MR MICHAEL GRAHAM:** Yeah, it's probably a question that could be directed more to Darren, because he deals in that healing therapeutic area. But, you know, as I've said before, the truth needs to be told. Right. We know that. But it does bring up old traumas and those traumas then ripple through the family, through to the community. And I know I've said it before but I'll say it again, is
15 that when our Aboriginal people come and sit here and open up those old traumas, those old wounds or even talk about wounds that they're going through now and once again, Darren can tell you about some more recent stuff that's just happened in the last week, that does ripple through the families.

20 But when - if a Minister comes and talks about their guilt, you know, their role in what's happened and, you know, all that kind of stuff and anyone from the Department coming in to talk about how they feel we've been done wrong, then they walk out feeling like they've off-loaded their guilt and they feel better. Where our people mostly will walk out feeling worse, because they are reliving
25 those traumas.

So, yes, I totally believe that this process needed to be done. But it's kind of like we tend to use humour so that we don't get so angry. And one of the things that we sort of joked about yesterday and this morning was the Jack Nicholson
30 statement of, you know, "You can't handle the truth", because that's really what we're up against here, you know. They can't handle our truth and, you know they make promises sitting here at this table to you fellas and walk away and they don't fulfil those promises. We have seen that already through the justice and others.

35 So yeah, it had to be done but is it making a difference? Did we just get our mortgage lifted yesterday knowing that we were coming here today? Maybe. Maybe not. We're a bit sceptical on some of the things that happened, the timing of things. But we're also, you know - we try to stay a positive mind and I've spoken to Minister Hutchins plenty of times and we have had some good yarns
40 about things and she was the one who pushed Treaty through this government, and I always acknowledge that. She turned up to the consultations and said she would push it and she did, and now we're talking Treaty. So I acknowledge the good stuff that she does and I hope that that mortgage being lifted yesterday was just coincidental.

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MR MCAVOY SC: But can the Commissioners understand that your observation is that for First Peoples who come and sit here and give evidence, that

their evidence sometimes comes at a personal cost? Darren, was there anything you wanted to add on that point?

5 **MR DARREN LOVETT:** I suppose what we are sort of really getting around to when we do talk about the holistic of health and that has been that guiding principle right through VAHS, as we now talk about social and emotional wellbeing, they're within our Mob and also too in the context there in our own culture is about how we sort of look at the model of the social emotional wellbeing. Because when we are talking about social determinants, you know, we
10 are talking about, as I just elaborated on before about The Voice, you are talking about political. Because A1 with us, it's always been about politics with us, with our Mob even tried to get our own voice or our own rights recognised.

15 I for one, like, you know, I have great concerns. I have great concerns every time when I'm sort of got an opportunity or something to go for funding. And we talk about it quite often, the competition out there, like to actually - like, I've got a service there, we've got about over 20-odd programs and we're talking about AOD, we're talking about adult mental health. We're talking about financial counselling. We're talking about a whole sort of - sexual assault. These are new
20 areas where we're actually there trying to sort of, you know, work with, and then if we just get a little bit more piece of sort of what we should be entitled to, to run a program, that would be sort of fully beneficial for, particularly with our Mob.

25 And when we sort of - and we go - we look into all that whole area there, sort of, you know, about the, all those social determinants, you are talking about AOD and what impacts on us. I mean, there's been an increase on AOD sort of people overdosing and then that itself is suicide. You know we are talking about trying to get out there and do prevention work but tell me how do you do it? How do you deal with the sort of minute funding source that you get? Why is that we have got
30 to be put in sort of competition with other ACCOs and other ACCHOs. As I said, it's like, we've looked at - we have been looked at or community will come to us, "Can you help us because, you know, my son, you know, he's got mental health problems there. But it's just not working for him there within the other sort of - with mainstream?"

35 We've got a program that sort of - look, I have to say this: With this program with (indistinct) in there, when it first started off there, before I started, I started in this position, and it was the demonstration sites whereby the three major hospitals that we go on the mental health boards there with a worker, just one mind you, started
40 off that way with St Vincent's and the Austin. And now it's like, "What came out of the royal commission on mental health?" Sure, they gave us more funding towards it whereby we were able then to sort of, you know, create a multidisciplinary team, therefore, to provide that service. But we still got the Mob there, slipping through those gaps and through the cracks in that system.

45 **COMMISSIONER HUNTER:** Can I just ask a question on that? So you've got the royal commission, they've made some recommendations, they've given you

money. But does the money take in the complex needs of our people? I think the other question that goes with that not only the complex needs, but the heal space, does it take into cultural considerations that are not an add on for our people, they should be a given?

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MR DARREN LOVETT: There were those recommendations that came out from the royal commission there and in particular too about providing a mental health service centre. So two of them. So far now, how far we're down the track now and we still haven't heard anything about where we are going to have those centres and ideally you want there within the metro area. Because not only that sort of like what we are looking after their sort of like on those other three hospitals, we're picking up others, just because we go outside the box. That's my thinking, and that's the way we, you know, that's how we - how VAHS -

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MR GAVIN BROWN: One of the challenges is that State government up a lot of integrating models and expect us to partner with other major mainstream agencies and they come to us saying can we partner. We feel like we should have our own, things like that. Because there are other integrated models that don't serve our purpose. (Crosstalk) they don't address the things you've just said. People can have choice but we need our own so we are grounded.

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COMMISSIONER HUNTER: You would partner with a mainstream. Would they hold - like generally, I'm just generalising, but would that be that they hold the dollars and then you partner with them? Is that a majority of -

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MR GAVIN BROWN: Pretty much. We can partner with mainstream anyway. We don't need formal partnerships at VAHS with them. So the position is we need our own. We need to have our own mental health hub so we can do all those things we can do in our way. We don't - we can't do it. It's not our space it's just not our space.

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MR DARREN LOVETT: If I dare say, disingenuous. So if they're coming out there with, "This is what you've got to work with, this is the dollars that are being spent. This is the co-design that you have got to come and work with." And my question is, what's in it for us? Fee for services? Therefore, I know that's what we put in. We put in submissions for a certain amount of money or dollars. No, we don't get it. It goes back around to this co-designing process. Ideally, you know, we would like to have a mental health space there for our Mob, particularly where we talk about all the time. You know, Country. It's so important. So spiritually healing and it's everything there that, sort of like, empowers us again, but also empowers our own sort of mental health.

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And we're getting to a point there where it's like, get to a point there sort of like I express this all the time and you don't get listened to. So I get loud and then when I get loud I don't get listened to, and the next thing - it's not that I'm shut down, I'll never get shut down. But the whole point I want to make is we still have people coming to us, looking for that assistance. I was late there for

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a meeting and these days now team meetings used to go berserk, everything knows them. I was late because I was listening to a concern that came through there of somebody driving to work there and they come across this lady who sort of - come across an Aboriginal woman with a hospital wrist band and had a cut
5 above her head, bleeding. Apparently she came from one of the mental health units or somewhere.

We kind of thought it might have been there with Saint Vincent. So we get around there and with our own network we try to find out who that person is, and so far
10 now we don't know. Another person comes through saying this has happened at one of the other hospitals, it's not meeting the health needs of this guy. He said he needs this one there where he came across with our model there, with the men's unit, and also therefore that, you know, that would be much more, sort of, you know - like this guy is on the verge. It's like he is suicidal ideation, you know.
15 And these are the things that's coming to us.

And when I sort of look at the whole big picture, I thought, you know - we do it all the time, don't we, because we catch power phrase there were movies and everything and I keep on saying, you know, Kevin Costner movie, Field of
20 Dreams, you know, "You build it and we build it and you know, they will come" and that's what it's about. That's - that's holistic. But time and time again we sort of down there on the ground level, on the grass roots level have to deal with that constantly with the staff I've got.

25 **COMMISSIONER HUNTER:** Can I just ask on top of that and maybe either one of you can answer this, but I think you've said it last time in your evidence, Mick, how many funding streams coming in and then how much reporting and if you think about it roughly how many hours would that take out of a day a week, a year, so far?

30 **MR DARREN LOVETT:** I think at last count we had about 105 reports we have to do per year, so we have got about 60 or 70 funding streams and it's probably more now. It's probably more. So it equates to a report every two and a half days or something or three days.

35 **COMMISSIONER HUNTER:** It's like a full-time reporting role.

MR DARREN LOVETT: It is. We are relying on government funding, which is, you know - and we would strive to be economically independent. If I may,
40 look, I've - I've - I've been CEO of two organisations, one was a Native Title organisation body and one as a local Aboriginal New South Wales Land Council that were financially independent. So I've had the experience of not having to go through the beast of government funding and you realise how much time and effort you put into that area to continue the service. It's very draining. It's
45 oppressive in its own right.

So, yeah, to be - as we are here today, VAHS would strive to be financially free and independent because it means that we can respond better to all our needs and those things that Darren's saying. We did say earlier it's getting better, it's improving but it's still a huge volume of work back of house that we have to
5 continue to do. So yeah, it equates to about one every three days, I reckon. And that whole circle is huge, it's a lot.

MR GRAHAM: Can I add to that Commissioner Hunter that we have to meet over 600 quality standards to meet accreditation as well, across eight or nine
10 different accreditations.

MR DARREN LOVETT: The complexities are huge, there are so many jurisdictions and different accreditations that we have to address every day so you are navigating through it all the time.
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COMMISSIONER NORTH: Reading your submissions, you talk about a challenge of adequate ongoing funding and I just wondered, thinking ahead to the recommendations we might make, are you able to tell us sort of some priorities in funding results that you would be looking at that we might be able to assist in
20 making recommendations about? I mean one is as Darren said about a psychiatric service, which would, I'm sure, come out of the Royal Commission. But, you know, what's the next three or four and what are the funding requirements that you would be looking at?

MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: I might just start with one thing, when I started at the CEO role at VAHS, which is getting close to eight years, one of the things I looked at where the community was coming from to make sure we were hitting the mark. It showed we have got regular clients from 498 post codes so it's not just here in the Fitzroy catchment, it's further than metropolitan, it's further than
30 Victoria. It just keeps going because we don't knock back any Aboriginal person who needs our support.

So what we did is we looked at a bit of a heat map where our communities were living within the metropolitan area and we found that there was this huge cohort
35 out in the western suburbs. They were getting nothing from anybody. And we also looked north and there was a lot out north and we looked south and east and everywhere. So we decided that rather than expecting people to come to Fitzroy with, you know - it's a bit of a battle with traffic and parking and all that kind of stuff, that we would take VAHS to them.
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So you are still going to have your Fitzroy people and some of the inner northern suburbs that will go there, but we wanted to go out to them. And it was also - and so we decided we would start with the northern suburbs. It was also in the, at the time what was the DHHS, which is now DFFH, (indistinct) because they changed
45 their name, didn't they. It was part of their actions that caused this to happen. Well, we got no support from them.

So, and we got no support from anywhere in State. No support from Commonwealth, but it was a need for our community and just like when we started in '73 and had nothing to work with, we said, "No we're going to do it anyway." And I put a proposal to the board and it was a risk that the board was
5 willing to take to make sure that we were supporting our people. So we've done that, and I thought that in doing that, and then later not so long ago we did the west, it would ease the pressure off Fitzroy and having to come in.

Well, that was a mistake, because what happened is it actually attracted more
10 clients from even further out, coming into those sites. So now we're at this stage where our numbers, and I think it's in one of the slides, of clients that are coming in and clients who haven't been seeing GPs and haven't been getting their check-ups have huge multiple complex issues. And we're not an eight-minute sort of medical service where you walk in, you get your eight-minute consult and out
15 you go.

We will sit down half an hour, hour, whatever it takes and go through the needs of the client walking in the door. So it takes time. By doing that your Medicare revenue is low because you are taking too much time looking after somebody,
20 which is a ridiculous thing. The primary funding that we get through Commonwealth, it also has a model of funding and because we are metro we are rated at the lowest. Even though 75 per cent of the Aboriginal population in this country live in urban areas they are rated at the lowest for getting funding, which is another ridiculous thing. It's kind of like they just don't want us around.
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So the needs that are coming through our door are huge at the moment, and I know Darren hasn't said it yet but I think there's a waiting list for our psychiatrist of about 86 was the last count, I think it was. Gavin will tell you that in Fitzroy they're getting a thousand calls a week. (Crosstalk). It's mayhem. Like, I felt like
30 when I got there it was like an emergency department and I thought we'd sort of eased that off a little bit, but the amount of people coming in for support now, it's almost pushing us back to that emergency department.

You know, it's back to almost chaos again because of the needs out there. And no matter how much evidence we push through governments to say, "Here's the needs", and it's only going to get worse because for some reason blackfellas keep having more babies than anyone else. But it's only going to grow and they are pushing all of this money into the tertiary end, "Wait till people are broken and then we'll do something."
40

We have got this fantastic Women's and Children's program and they do such great work with families and children, and they're probably one of the least funded in the organisation. From the moment I walked in the door at VAHS my very first meeting was to fight for that funding. I got 12 months and each year I get 12
45 months and 12 months, and 12 months. This last budget they said, "Okay. We are going to fund it ongoing" with the tiniest little increase of when I first fought for it eight years ago. Our population has grown so much more since then and I'm

appreciative that it's going to be some ongoing funding, but it doesn't meet the needs.

5 And that was just set up from a Fitzroy perspective and some of the inner northern
- but we've now got western suburbs and northern suburbs and, I mean, I forget the
numbers on the clients coming out of east, I just looked at them so I should know
but it's in the hundreds and they're coming from everywhere to VAHS, because of
reputation, the culture of the organisation, a whole range of reasons that they come
10 to VAHS. It's kind of like we're in a war situation where we just can't keep up
with the needs, and you know that's not fair on the people who are in need.

So in answer to your question, are we funded adequately? Not even close. We
probably could use another three or four times the amount of funding that we are
getting right now and we are increasing our funding but it's just not keeping up
15 and it's going to get worse. In saying that, I mean, even government has trusted
the VAHS model of care and they've proven that, because we are the central point
for the public intoxication reform, and it's our ACCOs who do most of the work in
the regional areas. We oversee that, because our model of care is brilliant. And
then, even outside of that, departments actually use our employment assistance
20 program because it's the best one that they've had a chance to use and it's
culturally relevant and looks after not just blackfellas, but white fellas as well. So
our model of care is recognised, they just won't fund us.

MR MCAVOY SC: If I might pull you up there for a second. Your written
25 submissions on behalf of VAHS also talk about as a conclusion from VAHS's
submission that there are grave difficulties facing the Aboriginal community
health sector in terms of the workforce and being able to keep the workforce up to
meet the need that you've just described. Can you just explain that in a little more
detail for the Commissioners, please?

30 **MR GAVIN BROWN:** Yeah, about 50 per cent of our over 300 staff, around 50
per cent, 55 per cent are Aboriginal, which is - in today's world that is not too bad.
Back in the eighties it was 98 per cent and it's a very intense, stressful area. A lot
of people do it for the love in a lot of cases. People have other options in today's
35 world. So we have to work hard to retain staff and to be able to make sure that
they can - it's affordable for them to work at VAHS, so we work really hard at
that.

40 Look, 50 per cent of our staff are under 35 and of which 60 per cent are
Aboriginal. So we have a pool of about 80 young people under 35 that we try to
invest in for growth. So we are doing what we can, but there's notwithstanding,
you know, the pressures of the - we have some great staff, we really doctors
I commend our staff highly. I really do. They go over and above, beyond all the
45 time.

So we, you know, we - people do move on to other jobs and we encourage that,
but while we are there we want to give them the best opportunity we can so that

they can grow and things like that. A lot of people return back to VAHS and we always say, "Welcome home". That's what we say. So we do invest a lot in that time and effort to be able to address all those workforce issues and workforce development, pathways and entry levels. Like we said we get a 1,000 calls in the
 5 Fitzroy medical, that's not any of the other programs in the building, so we are putting young people - they are getting 250 calls a day, plus overseeing it there. So it is quite strenuous, and we have to make sure they are safe and train them. Again the complexities of running a modern day VAHS.

10 So we are mindful and we still strive to mentor our young people in these roles and to go down pathways, I guess, workforce pathways but there is a lot of challenges. I've also got to add that our clinical operations, to answer one of your questions, Commissioner, our clinical operations are a financial pressure point within our service. You know, the investment needs to happen in those operations
 15 of VAHS because it is - it costs a lot of money to run our satellites and our services.

So we always find that, you know we get to this point of the year now and we have a look at what is our shortfall and our gap for next year. It could be this
 20 much, because we don't know whether we are getting this money again or that's gone. Okay how do we do it. So we go through this process every year, it's again, quite strenuous and fortunately we are okay. But it's not healthy as an organisation to be sitting there, not knowing what you're doing in the next 12 months after all this time.

25 So I think, and I don't want to undervalue the economic independence because it's so important. But even the flexible funding and long-term funding, outcome base if that's what it is, with proper investment would go a long way to addressing a lot of our issues. Okay. So at the moment, it's still that old cycle and it's very, very
 30 difficult.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: Do you get any support from any of the universities, with the workforce issues?

35 **MR GAVIN BROWN:** We have relationships with universities, we do. Melbourne Uni is just down the road and there's wonderful people there and even Vic Uni. So there's avenues there, they don't fund us but there's avenues where we can put them through workforce development and we actually do that a lot. Even the ACU just down the road. I think we have probably got about 10 staff at the
 40 moment that are doing registered nursing or optometry, two nurse practitioners. So we are investing in people's formal education and qual's to be able to come back and stay at the service, basically, if they choose to. So we do, but there's no real - I mean, we fund all that and pay for all that.

45 **COMMISSIONER WALTER:** Universities don't provide funded places?

MR GAVIN BROWN: No. No, not presently.

MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: I might add to that, and RMIT is someone we are working with at the moment, but I might add to that when GPs do their training they often send registrars to Aboriginal organisations. Like, why? Why do they
5 do that? Because they don't offer good cultural advice through those courses. Right? So they've got to send them out to us to work in the field. So when we send staff to their courses, they're not getting the Aboriginal side of things and so that's where, I think, courses in unis and TAFEs and that tend to fail.

10 That was one of the greatest things about Koorie College, was that it was done to our models and so - and our models, I mean our health workers and others that came out of there, they can work in any field, black or white, it didn't matter, because they had more than just the clinical aspect. They had the cultural aspect to it as well. So when you go to a government institution of unis and TAFEs and
15 all that, they just don't have what we can offer. And so, you know, do we want to have a partnership with someone who holds all the power and all the resources? No. Let us do our own, because we do it better than them anyway.

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Through the funding agreements, sorry, through
20 the funding agreements, is there inbuilt resources for you to be able to do professional development for your staff, though? Is that built in, so you get funded a certain amount to run a program, is it built into it?

MR GAVIN BROWN: I guess it's a question of priorities at the time. Now we
25 have more flexibility in funding, I have to say that, so we can budget those things in. It's just how well - on where they are - where it might be needed elsewhere. Sometimes we've still got to make those decisions. So we can't - it's not - it's very in a state of flux sometimes. But we will make it happen notwithstanding. But we will have to look at our budget and say, "Okay, this is what it's going to cost to
30 operate for the next 12 months", see where we're at, we can budget it in there, but knowing that if things fall off, you know, it might do that. So I don't want to undersell it again.

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: No, no, no.
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MR GAVIN BROWN: But we can build it in, but it's the pressures, the financial pressures on those budgets. And some are very stringent, just very singular, you can just do that with it. Some other areas are more flexible where you can actually
40 build those things in. But you are competing with every other financial need, I guess, yeah.

MR MCAVOY SC: Darren, I notice that you have been waiting patiently to add something.

45 **MR DARREN LOVETT:** Yeah. I know. Has Gavin got the floor?

MR GAVIN BROWN: Yeah. I know. All right. I'll be quiet. We compete at work like this too.

MR DARREN LOVETT: I think it was touched upon there, with the training
 5 with the staff there and particularly with, like, in the area of mental health with the
 workers that we have, there's also too is the also trauma sort of like what I do
 realise now what they're saying is vicarious trauma within the workplace, which is
 another fancy word saying, "Okay, we know that." As Aboriginal people with our
 10 workers we have been dealing with our trauma for quite some time now and
 effectively to providing the right sort of support there for our staff.

I will touch on, I mean we have just undergone a sort of work safety review, and
 a part of that was the vicarious trauma within the workplace and as we all keep on
 sitting around and I've been at many forums where they keep saying about, you
 15 know caring for the carer and that as well as like for the workers, to be told there
 by WorkSafe Victoria that, you know, "You're not culturally safe" I say, "Excuse
 me?"

So whereby our expertise is ignored, our narrative is stolen, our self-determination
 20 has been ignored. We address that all the time. Okay, we'll go along with that.
 We will implement what needs to be done, but we'll still be there doing what we
 always have done there with our workers. And what Gavin had said, many times
 with our workers, you know, they'll come - one of the criticisms of that review
 was to state there with the quality, you know, quality training. We ensure our staff
 25 get that quality training.

We're able then to have those negotiations with the funding body and saying,
 "Right, you know, we need an AOD worker but however we just can't get one so
 30 therefore we need an Aboriginal health worker" or whereby that person will be
 that social and emotional wellbeing worker. These are the things we have got to
 contend with and we create that. We keep saying all the time that we do need to
 sort of take real good care of our workers, because burnout stage for anyone there
 probably working in the mental health area is probably about five years or less.

35 Some have gone, worked longer, which is amazing, but, you know, it's - it's how
 do you sort of like sustainable workforce, particularly too when you get funding
 which is saying, "Here you go, go with that." So here we go we are running first
 time a sexual assault program, you know, unchartered area. So therefore we
 develop it ourselves, and therefore we get the training and we get the expertise.
 40 We get the Aboriginal commissions to come in there to provide us with that best
 advice how to provide that best supervision for our staff and also too there for our,
 you know, our clinicians. But it's an ongoing thing and I do believe, you know,
 we do our best, you know, what we can do with the flexibility of what we can do
 within our funding.

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MR MCAVOY SC: Chair, the next session is due to start at 2.30. I notice it's
 now quarter to 2. I did have one more question touching on matters contained in

the written submission on behalf of VAHS and I can ask that or we can rise now, if the Commissioners would prefer. The witnesses have touched on it in the written submission, but there's a question around cultural safety and mainstream services that I'd like to ask. Are you happy to continue, Chair?

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CHAIR: Yes.

MR MCAVOY SC: Thank you. Your written submissions at page 14 speaks about the difficulties with ensuring that in mainstream health settings that cultural safety is delivered to First Peoples in Victoria and I assume elsewhere. And then the demands that are then placed on VAHS to help the mainstream services develop their own cultural safety. Is your observation - what is your observation as to the level of awareness and the competency that exists in the mainstream services as at present?

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MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: Okay, well, I think it's one in four Aboriginal people who present in hospital walk away. One of our tasks is to decrease episodes of presentations at ED. So that's a value of an organisation like VAHS. They are more likely to come and see us than go to a hospital. There's whole different levels of different experiences and stereotypes and things like that. Hospitals do have an appetite, but hospitals have 12,000 staff or 8,000. Racism is rife and opinions are rife and that affects people.

So, yeah, and you know people generally don't like the hospital experience. So there's a whole range of datasets around that. I will say that it's our task, we want to decrease the amount of people presenting to an ED because of those reasons. If they're coming to see us, they are less likely to have to need a hospital. You probably heard all the stories about that, but it is very stereotypical. It's a huge body of work. Because it can be just that person over that bedside at that particular time and things like that, right through to just, you know, abhorrent care at times. That's how I would say it.

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The pressure on us as an organisation to teach people cultural safety is huge, you know. It's almost its own entity within our service and that takes us away from our primary core business of delivering health care to our - so we have to be careful where we invest our time into that and we are looking at how we do it, because everybody wants it from us. Everybody wants to know what cultural safety is and for us to tick the boxes and all that, but there's a lot of time factors win those things and it's a huge body of work.

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MR MCAVOY SC: Is VAHS adequately funded?

MR GAVIN BROWN: No, not at all.

MR MICHAEL GRAHAM: You add that to the accreditations and reporting, and all that, the back-of-house stuff. The want from us is unbelievable. I will say that when I talk to, whether it's my own family or anyone within the community,

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and this isn't everybody but there's always a fear in a hospital, you go in there and have a baby, generally there's a social worker or a child protection worker there ready to take your kid off you. So those things happen. It's also a place where if you go in there with a couple of bruises they think family violence straightaway.

5 For our Elders it's the place you go to die. So those things are always on people's minds and I don't know if you can ever remove that or if it will ever be removed. It will take many years of good service for that to happen.

10 There's good people in hospitals. There is. I was in hospital last year for an operation and was treated excellent. Got no complaints whatsoever. But if - when I go into the out-patients, if I'm sitting there and I might have my Aboriginal flag on or something like that, then straight away you feel the eyes looking at you and that's not from the staff. That's from the people you are sitting in the same room with. When you add that to, you know, Darren has brought up a couple of times
15 the 'hole Voice referendum and t'ings like that, we see it on social media. Anything about Aboriginal people, as soon as we put somebody Aboriginal up they want to bring them down. That's the society we live in.

20 So when it comes to hospitals, you know, there's so much investment going into hospitals and so little investment going into the services that prevent people from needing the hospitals. It's just crazy. It happens even within our organisation. The investment into the work that Darren does is far greater than the investment that goes into the work that Gavin's holding which is that clinical stuff, health checks. "Come and get a health check we'll look after you, we'll see what
25 conditions you've got before they come out of hand." People have come to checks and found out they've had a heart attack and we work through that with them and they thank us for saving their lives and things like that.

30 But hospitals, they keep building more and they keep fixing them up, but it's a scary place for our people and it's not just based on the staff either, or the environment, as in, you know they put some nice artwork on the wall or something like that. But that stigma is going to take decades and decades to go away I think. But we get no funding to support them. Even though they come to us and say, "Hey, can you help us with this, can you help us with that?" No
35 funding. So it's just more pressure on us and, you know a lot of times we don't knock back that because we know it's going to help our Mob. That's all we are concerned about is helping our people. So we put ourselves as, you know, executives, managers, staff through that pain of overburden because we just want to care for our community.

40 **MR GAVIN BROWN:** And we just want to make a difference so we do it.

MR MCAVOY SC: Thank you. Commissioners, we could probably spend all afternoon with this panel but I think - I suggest it might be a convenient time to
45 rise for the lunch break. They have - VAHS has provided us, the Commission with a written submission which touches on the areas that we've discussed. Unless there's anything further from the Commissioners?

CHAIR: Thank you all very much. I can't say it's a pleasure but it is great to have you here, to hear what you've got to say and it's so important and the way you've done it, the presentation is very community spirited from something that sort of
 5 adds on to Aunty Alma's story about how Fitzroy was a long, long time ago. So thank you very much for that history as well.

COMMISSIONER NORTH: Can I add my special thanks not only to your oral evidence today, but I spent time reading the history document that you've
 10 presented and it's so well written, so informative and a really inspiring story. So to read that and then for you to come along and talk to it, has been a very, very good morning. So thank you.

CHAIR: Thank you. So the Commission will adjourn until 2.30. Thank you.
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MR MCAVOY SC: May it please the Commission.

<THE HEARING ADJOURNED AT 1.56 PM

<THE HEARING RESUMED AT 2.40 PM
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CHAIR: Thank you. Counsel, we are ready to resume.

MR GOODWIN: Thank you, chair. We now hear from the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association, or VAEAI present to give evidence before the
 25 Commission. We have Aunty Geraldine Atkinson, Uncle Lionel Bamblett. And Dr Mark Rose is joining us online from the United States. If I can first invite you, Aunty Gerry, to introduce yourself in whatever cultural way is appropriate to the Commissioners.

AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: I'm really not sure, culturally. I wish I could say in Bangerang language, "Thank you very much for having us" but I can't. Lost my language, don't have it. My mother didn't teach it. So it was
 30 stolen. It was sleeping, but it's being revived by the young people reviving it. Okay. So I just wanted to say what I would like to do, I would like to acknowledge that we are on the lands of the Wurundjeri people, the Traditional Owners of the land.

I want to pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and I just acknowledge how hard those old people worked, you know, how they worked - a little piece of
 40 land that they only ended up getting and fighting really hard for it. I think they were, you know - it was something that I always remembered reading about, and I just really pay my respects to them, their Elders.

I also pay my respects to my Elders in the room, and those that are joining on live
 45 stream. I want to thank you, Commissioners, for the opportunity to present here today and to discuss our submission to the Yoorrook Commission. In our submission, we outlined how (inaudible) of the education system in Victoria has

impacted and shaped Koori learners historically and the efforts towards remediation, and reconciliation they are having engaged in. So the core mission has always been the Koori learners have the opportunities and support they need to reach their full potential, their academic potential and to achieve their aspirations.

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VAEAI views the education system as a key mechanism for enacting self-determination both within and beyond the classroom. As such, we at VAEAI have adopted an expansive view of education as a lifelong process that serves to strengthen the capacity of our Koori learners, their families and their communities.

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You have probably heard and you have probably heard lots of submissions and lots of people talk about it, but there can be no doubt that the historical colonial practices that were in place at the founding of Victoria's education system have left a long lasting legacy on Koori culture and our social structures. And, unfortunately, we continue to see the remnants of these practices from episodes of racism, exclusion, segregation, that placed our Koori learners at an unfair disadvantage.

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Since its beginning, VAEAI has worked consistently to create equity and fairness within the education system. Since our inception, the Victorian Koori community has seen increased Koori representation within the education and training sector, creating positive reflections of our Koori achievements, demonstrating to future students what they can achieve also. Today we are going to discuss both the good and the bad. It is important to acknowledge the long journey that we have walked as a community, as Koori people and more generally, the hardships of our past have provided strength of our future and we continue to strive to create a just and equal system where Aboriginal knowledges can be freely shared and appreciated.

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It's important for this Commission to understand that the true historical record and the harms that have been done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's documenting and detailing these injustices is critical for reconciliation and remediation. However, it's also important for this Commission to hear the hard work that we at VAEAI have done and continue to do to create a positive and culturally responsive and safe future for our Koori learners in all education and training institutions in Victoria.

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So we at VAEAI have worked with the Victorian Government since 1976 to ensure that there is a Koori voice at the table that, the Koori community has their say in educational decision-making. We have a partnership that has enabled us to empower students, families and their communities to participate fully in the education system, so that they reap the benefits of educational attainment.

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VAEAI has done this through the policy of Yalca education training for a new millennium, which has led to two key strategies. So in Wurreker and most recently the Marrung Aboriginal Education Plan 2016-2026. VAEAI believes that the Yoorrook Commission is well placed to strengthen Koori participation in and across all critical systems. So that's including health, justice, welfare and

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education. Thus allowing our communities to have increased participation in these institutions to embed Aboriginal perspectives such as cultural and spiritual practices, which are going to benefit all Victorians now and into the future.

5 I just want to say once again, we are grateful for this opportunity and thank you, Commissioners, for your dedication and your commitment to striving to improve outcomes for our Koori communities across Victoria. I just wanted to talk a little bit about myself. I'm a proud Bangerang Wurundjeri woman. My mother was born on Cummeragunja Mission. My father was born on Warangesda Mission in
10 New South Wales. They actually met at a dance at Cummeragunja, fell in love and had 14 children. I became president of VAEAI since 1999 and I've always been passionate about Koori education, and I've been working in education for over 40 years.

15 I first worked as a teacher aide, and Aboriginal teacher aide. This program was established by Aboriginal Education Services and there were two very important men in positions that enabled us to go on and improve and strengthen what we have done. That was Glen Beaton and Colin Bourke. I just wanted to acknowledge those two men. They were two that when I first started my work as
20 a teacher aide, because I firmly believed in education and they supported me along that way and along that journey.

I believe education is a key to empowering the next generation and breaking the poverty cycle. I am proud of the work that we have achieved at VAEAI,
25 advocating for our community, developing and driving key policies and strategies including as I mentioned earlier, Wurreker and Marrung that have shaped and influenced Aboriginal education in Victoria, leading to significant improvements in educational outcomes for the Koori community.

30 My passion and - my passion is education, but one of the things - and I, not alone that I had supports with me and I had my family supports and a very good advocate in my sister and my sisters. We believed that what we needed to do was ensure that if we were going to improve education outcomes in this State then we had to start at the earliest beginnings and we believed that early childhood
35 education was the first building block towards improving education for our children in Victoria.

So, I continue, and I want to let you know, that I continue to work hands on to this day at Lullas Children and Family Centre which we started in 1986, which was
40 called Lidje. We developed a kindergarten called Batdja and we started a school within a school for Aboriginal students called Manuka. We still have - we co-located Lidje and Batdja, and we called it Lulla after my mother. It was called Lulla after my mother who was so instrumental in helping so many children that I believe she deserved that accolade.

45 We wanted to make a culturally safe and a nurturing educational environment for our children, for our babies. And I just wanted to say that it has been one of the

most worthwhile things that I believe that we've been able to achieve and it's grown. It not only grew there. It's grown throughout Victoria and I'm really proud of that. Also, as you know, I recently, from 2019 until 2023, I served as a (indistinct) at First Peoples Assembly of Victoria. I don't know who wrote that
5 little bit of a bio for me, but there you go. Thank you.

MR GOODWIN: Thanks. Thank you, Aunty Gerry. And do you undertake to tell the truth today?

10 **AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON:** I do.

MR GOODWIN: Thank you. Uncle Lionel, what is your role at VAEAI?

15 **LIONEL BAMBLETT:** Can I interrupt that?

MR GOODWIN: Yes, of course.

20 **LIONEL BAMBLETT:** And introduce Mark Rose, he is the vice-president of our organisation. So in that sort of stream, he can come next.

MR GOODWIN: Yes, of course. Yeah, Mark if you could introduce yourself to the Commissioners and your role at VAEAI and anything else you want to add following Aunty Gerry's opening.

25 **MR MARK ROSE:** Yes. Thanks, Steve, and, Lionel, for that. I'm Mark Rose, I'm a Gunditjmara man with family ties to the Eastern Maar group and the Gunditj Mirring group. My day job is Pro Vice-Chancellor of Indigenous Strategy and Innovation at Deakin. And I'm really proud to say that I've been at VAEAI - this
30 is my 29th year on the committee and management of the VRC at VAEAI. And in that time, I would like to say I've learnt more about education than I have from my four academic degrees combined, because people like Lionel and Geraldine, and the aunts at the table; Aunty Mary, Aunty Laura, Aunty Melba, Aunty Rose their training of me in education has been so pronounced.

35 But, Tim, if it's okay I would like to acknowledge Country and I'm a long way off Country at the moment. So I acknowledge that you are on the land of the Wurundjeri people and pay respect, of course. And I declare I bring the spirit of my ancestors and the wisdom and the complements of my Elders to this gathering today. I'm on the colonial place called Boston and I want to recognise the
40 Massachusetts tribe to the east, the Nipmuc tribe and to the south, the Wampanoag or the Mashpee tribe. And in - the way they acknowledge Country over here, they don't use the word "unceded". They use the word "occupied". So I'm on the occupied lands of those three tribes and in doing that say I come with respect to
45 share knowledge.

MR GOODWIN: Thank you very much, Mark. Then Uncle Lionel, if you wanted to introduce yourself to the Commissioners and respond in any way that you want.

5 **MR LIONEL BAMBLETT:** Thank you. As stated my name is Lionel Bamblett. I'm the general manager of VAEAI. I'm a proud Wiradjuri, Yorta Yorta, Bangerang man. I am the general manager of VAEAI. I think I just said that, didn't? I have worked for our community in education for over 30 years,
10 providing advice to successive governments in Victoria on the ways to improve education and training opportunities for our Koori community.

I've been fortunate enough to advocate and represent our Victorian Koori community in Indigenous education and training issues at a local, State and national level and sometimes international. I'm proud of the foundations we have
15 created from a small group of parents and community members to an organisation of 46 staff, I think that's slightly got larger, and 32 LAECGs which is the most important component, that's our local community voice network across Victoria, seeing VAEAI recognised a peak body for Koori education and training in
20 Victoria and as equal partner with the Victorian Government in Koori education since 1990.

All right. We have worked hard to develop key policies and strategies including Yalca, Wurreker and Marrung. Wurreker is the strategy in the TAFE, adult
25 education area and also covers higher education. And then Marrung, that ensures our Mob get a seat at the table and a voice in the education and training space. And that's vital, having our community's voice at the table, having our community's voice input into the planning matrix of what is delivered in regards to education and training for everyone. Not just for our own, but for everyone. All
30 right.

In 2023 I was fortunate to be - I didn't want to write this, but anyway - fortunate to be awarded an honorary doctorate from Deakin University in recognition of my work and dedication for Koori education in Victoria. But also that's an honour not
35 only just in their - I mean I've been on several and multiple national committees in education and training across the country, and it's been a real honour to represent our community's voice in those processes but also taking forward not only my own personal view, but taking forward our community's voice in that matrix.

40 So when I was talking about those 32 LAECGs, that's the basis for where we develop our strategies going forward and gathering the community's knowledge and voice back into the matrix and back into planning the way forward in education and training. All right. We've got to look at the journey and I will cover that later, but the journeys that we have achieved in education from, since we were incorporated or since inception, really. And I've got to pay
45 acknowledgement to the late Professor Colin Bourke and late Mary Atkinson who were the forerunners as the chairs and co-chairs of VAECG, which led to the formation of VAEAI, we became incorporated in '85.

From that date in 1985, when we were incorporated, we had two year 12 graduates in the State of Victoria. Two. All right. We have moved to the point where nearly 700 are finishing year 12, but still a long way to go, folks. Still a long way to go. I think I jumped the gun here a little bit. I have. But I'll throw back to Geraldine.

AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: Actually Lionel actually stole my lines, but that's fine, he's part of the journey. What he says is right. We were established in 1985, the Victorian education association incorporated, VAEAI, which is one of the reasons we were able to - and in those days you had to become an incorporation to receive government funding and that's why we moved from the VAECG to VAEAI and that was a really important because we were able to receive that funding to become established.

We were established as a VAECG in 1976. There was a small group of parents, and I can remember Colin travelling across the State, Colin Bourke, Professor Colin Bourke, who was just so important and vital to the work of VAEAI. And getting parents together and talking to parents and getting them interested in what they would see as being better for, you know, a better education system for their children. And he was - and I always remember he actually - when he met up with Mary and he met, you know, this really feisty woman who would have her say and stand up and say to principles and government people and everyone else about the things that really, really stuck with him.

He said, "I can remember this woman telling this story about how she had to go and meet a principal and her heart was thumping, beating in her chest and she was scared to talk to him but it was what she wanted for her daughter and she stood up and did it." It was a story he really loved telling about Mary. They were, as Lionel mentioned the two early co-leaders of that formation that aimed to increase involvement in early education decision-making.

That went on to enable, you know, more Koori members to participate, you know, to continue the journey with us in shaping that education provision for Koori students. So as Lionel said, you know, VAECG it was about advocacy for holistic education and training. We did realise it had to be important, early childhood service, post compulsory education and training. The VAECG advocated for education that recognised and reflected the Koori community. So VAECG worked tirelessly to ensure that the Koori community's right to be actively involved in decisions about their education for their children.

And as Lionel said, we formally became VAEAI in 1985 and we were so very proud that work advocacy that had taken place about, you know, the work that Colin and those people did across Victoria about bringing people together that we were able to form those 32 Aboriginal education consultative groups. What we wanted and what they wanted to know and what they wanted to hear was what was happening in their communities in education for their children. The truth stories,

the stories that only those parents could tell and I think that really became a part of, a very important part of the work we have been doing and what we have been able to continue to do, is listening to those stories from those communities about how we can improve education for their children.

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You know, we've always had that holistic philosophy on education and training. So we believe that - and, you know sort of our ethos has always been that it's a lifelong process, education. So, you know, it's from early childhood right through primary, secondary, you know, TAFE, adult education, tertiary education, the whole - you know, sort of the whole gamut of that. And because we recognise that, you know, the influence that the social and economic circumstances that have on individual families and communities, and access to fair and equitable education and training improves - improves - the lives of our children, the lives of our families and it does.

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I just want to say that, we talked about the community organisations with members from across the communities. We talked about our networks. We talked about who we represent on behalf of (inaudible) we talked about our structures. And just, it's really important to just, I think, to - I can't get the word out but accentuate the work of the LAECGs. Their work in their communities has been very important and Mark mentioned some amazing women that had really fought really hard during those processes and for that work to continue and it's still, you know, a priority that we need to ensure continues.

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You know, what we do is, we ensure that we place the Koori learner at the centre of all of our policy and all of our decision-making. And we believe that those students provided with strong support and services are going to achieve their educational and training aspirations. We were really fortunate that we did end up with the Marrung Aboriginal Educational Plan, the first of its kind, actually, in the State. It was a 10-year plan. Remember plans would only be for a three or four cycle, and electoral cycles. We were able to get one that was 10 years old, that would last us for 10 years.

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So it was a unique plan. As I said, the first in the Nation, actually. I know that other States have done it but it was through - we were the first and we were the first to ensure that we did get that plan in place for 10 years because we wanted to see and ensure that it would improve - you know, that it assisted in ensuring that we had a critical role to play in closing the gap between Koori and non-Koori communities, families and learners, and we think that Marrung has made a really strong contribution to our goals.

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Similarly, with the Wurreker strategy, that's based in self-determination, and supports the Koori community. So that's to be involved in the development of sustainability of higher and further education within our communities. I just want to give you a little bit of history about Wurreker and how it came into being, because it's really interesting. What we were doing, and I can remember being in charge, in adult education, further education within the TAFE institute and the

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programs that we were offering our students - and it was really good, we wanted them to be a part of, you know, a part of education, they would learn about education - but they were not programs that were going to lead to careers.

- 5 They were not programs that were going to lead to jobs. They were not programs that were going to make sure that we were increasing, you know, the economic value to our community, and so they there lots - and don't get me wrong, they were really great programs, got people interested in wanting to do education. They were arts and crafts. They were, you know, language teaching programs.
- 10 They were cultural programs. There were a whole range of other things.

- But with Wurreker, what we decided what we really needed to see, we needed to see that we were providing programs within our TAFE institutes and our adult and further education institutes that there would be certificate courses, certificate Is,
- 15 certificate IIs and certificate IIIs that were going to lead to employment and it was structured programs that would ensure that people would get employment.

- It was connected to their communities and that was the beginning of our Wurreker strategy and our Wurreker strategy has grown, has grown so big and we owe it to
- 20 our general manager here for that. But it has. But, you know, so we advocate Koori learners in those fields, in adult and community further education, in apprenticeships, in registered training organisations. And we have three in the State that we work with and that we support. And they are very successful.

- 25 If you want to see and you should have had a look and we will go through and look at VACSAL's graduation ceremonies. The people that graduate from those diploma - those certificate IV and diploma course, from that registered Aboriginal training organisation, which was a dream of Alf's, those people, it really - it makes you think about all the hard work that you put into education and we were getting
- 30 there, because we were getting those young people through those, with those.

- So, you know, that is really important. We also wanted to talk to you about one of the other programs that we were able to do, is we were able to create Koorie Academy of Excellence which is our KAE. We worked with a regional director
- 35 here in the northern suburbs of Victoria and looking at a program that we thought - and you know, "excellence" is a word that sells, you know. "Excellence" has the connotations that you are going to get great things.

- So that's why it was called the Academy of Excellence. But what we did get out of that was we did get excellent students. We ran a program for those children that wanted to - you know, there was a really streamlined process for them to enter. They had to be committed. They had to be ensured that what they wanted to do was continue with their education. They had to prove they wanted to be a part of that program and participate in that program.
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But one of the things and I just wanted to say this, all along the way in all educational things we do, one of the most important things is you don't give up

your culture at the expense of education. So within that program, it was providing cultural programs as well. And that's what we see and that's what we have done at KAE all along the way. So and we have had high achievers come from that Koorie Academy of Excellence that have gone on to university. We have.

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One of our other programs that we are really proud was Toorong Marnong. Now, that - and Marj will probably talk more about this than me. But it's about ensuring that Koori learners are supported to enter higher education and you know, sort of, that they are well equipped and they're prepared to learn. It was the work that Mark has done for VAEAI in relation to that program has been really excellent. No matter, Mark will tell you, no matter what your ATAR score is, if you have done and completed year 12, we will get you into a university. And he has been able to achieve that.

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15 I want to tell you about a story, a young man, comes from a little town called Barma, population 200 people. Went to Echuca High School, did his VCE year 12, broke his leg and couldn't continue at school. But he wanted to do law but, you know what, he didn't get a very good ATAR score, a very poor ATAR score. So he came to us, Toorong Marnong and he asked his father, his father came to see me and said, "Is there any way you can help?" And I said, "Yes, I've got someone who can do the job for you" and it was Mark.

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We were able to get him into a university, it wasn't a university of his choice, but it was then a university that then enabled him to go to a university of his choice. He completed his law degree and he's now working for some very high prestigious judge in the justice system somewhere. So that's Toorong Marnong for you. That's just one story, the Toorong Marnong has been able to help. They're the things we've been doing.

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30 We have had key projects. We've got a partnership working collaboratively with the Victorian Schools Building Authority and that work includes, you know, bringing together key Koori voices for the planning stages through the construction of all new Victorian school builds and major upgrades to existing schools here in Victoria.

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So what we have been able to do is, you know, I think you have probably read in the paper about the new schools having Aboriginal names, by having Koori names and that's what we've been able to achieve as being a part of that program. And what we wanted to see within that program that those schools reflect our culture.

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They reflect it, so our kids can see when they enter those schools and go to those schools that it's not only for their academic learning, it's also about learning about their culture. So I might let Lionel continue or Mark. I think I've talked too much and I think that they should have a say.

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MR GOODWIN: Yeah. I should probably earn my keep and ask a question at some point as well. In particular I think we have had education in action so thank you Aunty Gerry, in terms of that history and growth of VAEAI and the important

work that it's done. Uncle Lionel, given it will be the 50th anniversary in 2026 of VAEAI, the establishment of VAEAI and reflecting on that growth that both you and Aunty Gerry have mentioned and particularly you mentioned the growth to 46 staff and 32 LAECGs, what are your reflections on how the role of VAEAI has developed and grown over the past 48 years?

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Probably I'll ignore my notes, pretty bad at reading my notes anyway. But reflection on the growth of VAEAI. We started off in a small way, but it's grown, and it needs to grow more in the sense that the only way we're going to - people keep mentioning Close the Gap and parity. Well, the only way you are going to achieve that is growing a greater community voice and family input. Because it comes back to the community and the family in supporting their children into an education. But not only their children, themselves as well.

We have a growing number of adults in adult education at present and through the TAFE system as well, and going into universities now. So what we have got to look at is how we actually capture that and go forward and what the key to that is actually that community voice and the community input into it. At the moment we have 32 LAECGs, they are voluntary bodies and sometimes it's a struggle.

We have people employed to support those 32 LAECGs through their functionality. But also at the same time we actually need to look at how we strengthen that and grow that because we want those LAECGs, Local Aboriginal Education Consultative Groups to not only interact with their community, but interact with their local kindergartens, the local day care centres, the local schools, the TAFE colleges and the higher - sorry, the secondary schools to assist those students going through. That's the role of our LAECGs, that's vital and important to the structure of the organisation and probably that's our greatest strength is to build on that.

And we need probably greater support in that area to actually do that and actually to grow that voice and grow that community input. We have developed a structure, I probably should return to my notes, we have developed a structure that enables our community to participate and to have a voice, right. Where once we become incorporated, we develop those LAECGs, then we put a body in place called a committee of management which has now changed to the Victorian Representative Council. That's those 32 LAECGs and other community members coming to the table, right, and talking about the needs and wants of their local community in regards to education and training.

When we mention education, we also got to tie it to that training, all right. So that's what's happening at present. So we have the 32 LAECGs coming together at the VRC Victorian Representative Council, in fact, I've got a meeting next week with that. So, as chaired by Geraldine and Mark when he returns that will actually look at actually growing the way the community participates across the board in education and training.

Although we are achieving it and we have sort of, we are saying that we are achieving numbers and getting numbers through, and we are, but also there's still a gap. There's still a gap that we have to address. During an international
 5 pandemic we had 100 per cent enrolment rates in kindergarten in the State of Victoria, two years running. Last year again we had 100 per cent enrolment rates in kindergarten. So when I keep talking about Close the Gap, we smashed that gap in those years. But that's about enrolments, that's not about participation.

10 So what we have got to look at is how we actually then come back to participate, to get the family's voice involved and the family's planning and involvement in their little darlings going to those little day care centres. Because that's your building block if you want to go through the schooling system, you want to go into the TAFE diploma, higher education, that's your building block and that's what
 15 we're looking to do and we're looking to achieve that and that's happening to a large degree. All right. And we will continue to do that. All right.

So that's the LAECGs. The LAECGs are really vital in growing that voice and I know that people got a bit sick of the title The Voice because we got outvoted,
 20 right, but the reality is you've got to have community participation and community voice in any planning matrix going forward or what's the use of an Aboriginal voice otherwise? That's reality, all right. We are growing the numbers. I think VAEAI is good proof of that, but also it leads to other things that has to happen and that's in the health sector, across the whole spectrum of life, really.

25 So we need to look at how we do that. So, "All dimensions of education and training" that's the title here, "places a Koori learner at the centre of all education and policy making." And we do. "We believe that students provided with strong support and services will achieve their educational and training aspirations". But
 30 it's about providing that support and that's coming from an organisation. And it's not only, we don't work in isolation from other community organisations. We work in conjunction and in partnerships with those organisations, and also the education system in a lot of cases.

35 All right. But also at the same time we've got to look at how we actually continue that support for a student going into those learning environments. The Marrung Aboriginal Education plan, we have spoken on that, 2016 to 2026, coming to the end of its tenure. It's a unique 10-year plan and it sets the community up to have The Voice at the table. That's at the local level at the kindergarten. The TAFE
 40 system for you to have a Wurreker strategy in your TAFE college, the TAFE college has to get support from the local community and agreement, otherwise it won't be funded. That's a ministerial decision that has been made and we work with the system to make sure that happens, right.

45 So that's about that self-determination, that's right across the spectrum. So it's in schools. Geraldine spoke on the KAE in the schooling system, the Marrung Education Plan that supports students going into school. But not only supports the

student, supports the school to interact with the community and the parent. Education obviously has a critical role to play in closing the gap between Korris and non-Kooris. Sometimes I don't like that Close the Gap business, but that's - families and learners. Marrung has made a strong contribution to this goal and it will, and it will continue to do so. Similarly, the Wurreker strategy is really vital and important.

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10 **MR GOODWIN:** Can I just interrupt you for a minute before you move on and leave the Wurreker - Marrung? On page 34 there's targets and measures. I just wondered what has been the outcome measured against those targets? Do you have that in front of you?

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Not in front of me, no.

15 **MR GOODWIN:** I think we should be able to bring it up on page 34 of the Marrung Aboriginal Action Plan.

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Those Education State school targets?

20 **MR GOODWIN:** Yep.

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Yes. 25 per cent more year 5 students will reach the highest achievement in reading and maths and I think we are on track to do that, but we have still got a way to go, obviously a long way to go. One other thing that's played a role in this, a negative role in all this is actually COVID. It's only the effects of the COVID years themselves, but the fallout from that. So people have been reluctant to actually further engage. Go back to what I said originally. For a student to achieve, you have to have the support from the family and caregivers, because a lot of our children are in out of home care, caregivers as well, right, to actually support their achievement.

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35 Now, for that to occur, they've got to have a voice in the matrix of education, and we will build on those numbers. When you consider - and I know I always throw back this - but, you know, we had two year 12 graduates in the whole State back in '85, that's a phenomenal growth, but we want to do better. We've got to do better and we are getting people through into TAFE, to diploma courses. We are getting people into degree courses, into doctorates now. There's one on the board there, Mark Rose. So our people have doctorates, but also at the same time there's a long way to go in those spaces and our community have the basis to do that. I don't know if that answers the question fully.

COMMISSIONER NORTH: Are you able to run through those dot points and sort of, give your reaction to them, given we are nearly at the end of the 10 years?

45 **MR LIONEL BAMBLETT:** I think that's something we are going to have to sit back and consider across the breadth of the program, the breadth of the strategy. All right. Because at the moment I'm sitting here all of a sudden you spring on

me this, I think we need to go back and look at that and how we work through the matrix of bringing that all together. All right. Okay? And we will do that and that's something that (crosstalk) that's part of the planning for the next iteration of Marrung.

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And we have actually been raising it with the current Minister for Education and current Minister for Training and the current Minister for Early Childhood because we have got three Ministers we have to relate to. And we are talking with them about the next generation of what we want going forward. We don't want to return back to a plan that's the duration of the life of government. Right. So, in the past, you only could plan for election cycles and we want to get away from that. And that's why we moved to Marrung for a 10 year strategy, okay.

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COMMISSIONER LOVETT: (Inaudible) have bipartisan support.

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MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Yes.

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Talk us through some of that stuff if that's okay.

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MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: It's just a matter of dialogue basically. I mean, we have a relationship with both sides of government, because you have to. As you said, made a statement saying that you don't know who the next government will be. So we need to actually have a dialogue with the opposition as they are currently called and we will do that. And we know who the Shadow Minister for Education is and we will go and meet with the shadow Minister for Education and the leader of the opposition as well. Whether we like it or not, they are people that will be voted in and we have set a policy framework around education that we have to actually look at dealing with, and we will.

25

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Thank you for that.

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MR GOODWIN: Commissioner Lovett, if you could turn your mic on.

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COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Thanks. I have done it, I saw that in the background. Funding though, adequate funding. Do you feel governments commit adequate funding for the 10 year strategy. I know in the last budget that we just got announced a couple of weeks ago, it was \$30 million.

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: 51.

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COMMISSIONER LOVETT: 51. You're across it. That's great. Over the life span of the 10-year strategy have government, in your view invested enough in Aboriginal education?

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MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: In a systemic way, yes. By what I mean by that is by the schooling system. Right. And we have a relationship not only with the State school system, we have a relationship with the Catholic school system and

the independent school system as well. Because they are our children whether they go into each one of those areas, so we have to look at how we do it. And we have an ongoing relationship with those groups and to do that.

5 The other one then is about, that's the systemic buy-in. But then what you're talking about is over the top of that and we're not quite sure what that 51 million is targeted for, but there will be some ongoing meetings that we will have with relevant ministers in relation to that. Because we see its vital for Marrung to continue, and not only continue but to strengthen. Because what we have got to
10 look at go back to what I was saying about buying, getting community buy-in and family buy-in. That is vital, that is a key ingredient.

And how do you do that? At the moment we don't have the mechanism or - sorry, we do have part of the mechanism but probably not to a great a degree we would
15 like to be able to go out and meet individually with a lot of folks who actually get their views on what is currently needed for their child's education and training.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: Can I ask a question? You said here that remnants from the explicit self-determination of the education system and the 19th
20 and earlier 20th century can still be found in compulsory and non-compulsory education and that Koori learners are often placed at an unfair disadvantage.

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Your microphone isn't the best, unfortunately.

25 **COMMISSIONER WALTER:** You talk about the remnants of exclusion, segregation that happened in the 19th and early 20th century and how remnants of that can still be found in schooling today.

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Yes.
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COMMISSIONER WALTER: Can you explain a little bit about what that looks like?

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: It's basically called racism to be quite honest but,
35 look, and we know it exists. We know it's out there. We deal with it. As an Aboriginal person we deal with it every day. But not only that, we have got to look at how we actually assist our community to deal with it and systemically deal with that sort of stuff, right and we're doing that. That's why you enter into a partnership.
40

You don't enter into a partnership lightly. We don't enter into a partnership because we want to be a partner with non-Aboriginal government. We enter into a partnership for the simple reason that allows us to walk through the door, to go and talk to the systems about the need for greater education involvement from our
45 community in a dual way. One is around changing the curriculum so that there is the recognition of Aboriginality, all right, and the other then is about also about the individual's growth patterns that can occur. I don't know if that answers.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: Yes.

5 **AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON:** I was going to say that - because when
you talk about -I can remember being in primary school, it seems like a million
years ago but we did - I can remember having a segregated class. It was
a segregated class for Aboriginal students in that school, in my primary school that
they placed the Aboriginal kids in. Now, today, you know, there are some people
10 that might say that there's still segregation happening because, one they're going
into, they are segregating our kids into schools that are called closed principle
learning out whatever comes and that's where they send our kids who they see
who have behavioural problems, who have, you know, those sort of things
happening. And that's where our kids, that segregation, it's still happening. So it
needs to stop.

15
What needs to happen in those schools things need to be working with those kids
so that they can return to that mainstream school. It shouldn't be somewhere that
they just shut them up and leave them there. There has to be work that has to be
done, so they can integrate them back into those other schools. So that's still
20 happening there. So things like that haven't changed. They just call them
different names or, you know, sort of different, I don't know, different systems or
whatever.

25 But it does happen, and what we need to do is we need to ensure that, and it does,
it comes up. Don't worry, we get, you know - you go to a committee meeting or
a justice meeting, they will talk about racist schools and talk about a whole lot
ever things with us and things that need to be done. Usually I'm the one that will
sit there and I do, I take it back to VRC back, to our committee of management
and say, "This is - these things are happening and what we have to do is we have
30 to deal with them."

35 So what we have to do is we have to - and it is about building those partnerships
and it is about building relationships. There are things that we can't talk about at
the moment that have been occurring, but in relation to some racist incidents but
we've been working with the department on them, and there's actions being taken.
So that does happen and what we want to do is advocate and make sure that there
are consequences for those actions.

40 **MR GOODWIN:** Are there any -

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Before you go on, just in response to that as well,
since the failure of The Voice referendum, there's been a real growth out there in
a lot of our communities in regards to racism issues, especially in and around
schools, outside of schools and it's happening. And we know it. And our
45 community comes back and tells us about that.

There are things that we have in place that not only we - that's - I'll go back to what I was saying originally, that's why we entered into a partnership. In the Department of Education there are people employed in dedicated Aboriginal positions in the Department, right, in different levels, right, and also in the TAFE
5 system, that actually are able to actually work with the system to actually change a lot of that around. Do you know what I mean? Touched briefly on something that is occurring and that we will deal with. But to deal with that we also got to bring into play that partnership and we have got to bring into play those Aboriginal workforce members to actually deal with those matters, right.

10 Because we don't want our children out there being racially abused. We don't want our children out there being discriminated against and so that's what we're doing. But also we were talking about the levels of education. Well, I think this woman sitting here is a really good example. When we were growing up, back in
15 the day, Aboriginal people were not allowed to go to a high school. You went to a secondary school that either trained you for menial labour, right, boys' technical school which I had to go to. And also Geraldine had to - and Esme, who now both lead Aboriginal organisations and was the chair of the Treaty group, were only allowed to go to the girls' school because they could learn how to cook and
20 become menial slaves or labour, sorry, not slaves. Education has changed in that degree but what we have got to look at is actually changing it more.

MR GOODWIN: Commissioner North, you were going to ask?

25 **COMMISSIONER NORTH:** I was going to ask after we finish this hearing if you've got an example or two of the sort of racist behaviour that you've come across and how it has been handled it could be very useful for our report.

30 **MR LIONEL BAMBLETT:** Okay.

COMMISSIONER NORTH: You can send in writing afterwards just to give us a bit of flavour of the sorts of things that you've dealt with and what the outcome has been and what the process has been, because it sounds like it has been a useful
35 process.

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Yep. Because, look, just recently I've a phone call from a regional director and you know the education system, you've got the secretary and you've got dep secs and you've got regional directors. I've had a phone call from a regional director about a racist incident or two and we are
40 going to have meetings about it and putting in place strategies to address those matters. So the hierarchy within the education system are actually moving on that. That won't happen unless you have a strengthened relationship and that's what I would highly recommend that Yoorrook - that we actually look at actually strengthening up. All right?

45 **COMMISSIONER NORTH:** Strengthening up how?

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Strengthening up the partnership arrangement, not only the partnership arrangement but the power for the Aboriginal voice within the whole matrix of things, all right?

5 **MR GOODWIN:** And talking about that -

COMMISSIONER WALTER: Mark Rose wants to speak.

10 **MR MARK ROSE:** Thank you. I just want to say that if we had to rely on data coming from the State government that would be about 12 months away. If we're relying on data from the Federal Government, that's two years away. But at VAEAI if something happens in a school today, it'll be known at VAEAI by 5 o'clock. It's real time. They're real fast and VAEAI are on the case advocating and defending and looking into those issues. So the racism, whether it appears
15 covertly or overtly, VAEAI is essential to dealing with it in real time, real fast.

AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: I just wanted to say, talking about another incident it was something he had to fix in relation to racism, bullying and fighting for things. And it was about expulsions and things and he was, you know, there
20 were things we couldn't fix. You know, the Department has particular rules and things like that, but they're alternative that we could look at. There are alternatives there that we could bring into play that would make sure those children were being expelled, didn't have anywhere to go or just dropped out. We were looking at alternatives for them and where they could go.

25 So those are the sorts of things that VAEAI has been able to do. But looking at the system, what you need to do in relation to it is look at some - there are things that, you know, there are things that are in play that, Lionel will know more about them than me, but you know, sort of why they don't have, why there aren't
30 expulsions, why there aren't suspensions, why there can't be so many suspensions. So why there has to be alternatives, like, "Keep your child at home", those sorts of things. So, you know, they're the sorts of things that you need to look at, they are the sort of things you need to change.

35 **MR GOODWIN:** Just on some of the things that need to change, if I can bring up page 15 of the Marrung Strategy which shows the plan overview including the key system enablers, and the focus on excellence in teaching, learning and development in each area of learning, it being early childhood, schools and higher
40 education and skills. So if we can just zoom in on the two tables there.

This might be something, Mark, that you're able to speak to. One of the particular issues that is highlighted in a number of aspects of the strategy is regarding curriculum development and VAEAI's advocacy on that issue with the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. I just wondered, Mark, if you could
45 describe why curriculum development is important and what type of curriculum development is required?

MR MARK ROSE: Thanks, Tim, for that question. Through my role at VAEAI I hold a place on the board of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. I sit on the board of Counsellor Deans of Education across the Nation, and I also up to very late chaired the Indigenous advisory group at ACARA. And what we
5 have always said at the table of VAEAI going back to when I first wandered into VAEAI is that our kids were silent and mute in the curriculum. And that silence has disadvantaged our kids, but it's also disadvantaged the general population.

The curriculum that comes out of ACARA to the VCAA, then out to the
10 jurisdictions, has now been - we move from a white wash curriculum into one that's got closer, tone and context, and all kids are the beneficiaries of that. So it's about teaching our kids and making our kids be able to be seen and heard in the curriculum. But as a nation, one of the insidious things about the Education Act of 1872 and before that, the Aborigines Protection Act of 1869 was the fact that it
15 was like a snake biting itself. While they moved to have us extinguished, it cut non-Indigenous people off from the cultural heritage of the land they live on.

So when the Adelaide declaration came about, followed by the Melbourne declaration and Indigenous perspectives in the curriculum, we got all excited. But
20 then the kids that were taught in that year are now just entering teacher training and will come back, having had 12 years of Indigenous perspectives at different levels in their student journey. But one of the, the trans-generational vestiges of non-Indigenous people knowing very little about Indigenous perspectives, which has added to the disadvantage across the nation, is the fact that, you know,
25 teachers for a very long time knew very little about how to apply the Indigenous perspectives as they exist.

It means that our curriculum is rich and full. Right. And the work of VAEAI has benefitted not only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander but all kids are the
30 beneficiaries of the work from VAEAI.

MR GOODWIN: You raise a good point there. So if curriculum development has been fulsome and the tools are available to teachers if in regards to the development of the curriculum that still ultimately requires the teachers to have
35 the tools to be able to teach that material. On that issue, do you have any reflections on teacher education itself and the capacity of teachers to be culturally capable to be able to teach the curriculum that VAEAI has assisted to develop?

MR MARK ROSE: I certainly do and without getting too political on it I was
40 very excited that when the AITSL standards came out and I thought that was great. But I would argue it's time to revisit them and perhaps add a couple more standards and then for the Victorian Institute of Teaching to take those standards a bit more seriously in the application of licensing to teach.

I say this in a very precarious time because there's a worldwide shortage of
45 teachers and anyone with a pulse and education qualification can have a job at the moment. But we need to make sure that there are higher standards in teacher

5 registration around Indigenous, and the sector is calling out for it. Everywhere you go, non-Indigenous teachers say that they are the outcome of being deprived of Indigenous perspective in their own personal education. At universities we are trying to imbue all subject areas with Indigenous perspectives, and - but it's a slow drip-feed arrangement.

10 And I would argue if there are a couple more standards that were a bit more cutting edge and that auspicing accreditation bodies took them more seriously, rather than have an Aboriginal Contiki tour and get your tick for Indigenous, I'd like to see a bit more rigorous.

15 **COMMISSIONER LOVETT:** Can I ask, you mentioned the standards there, what are the other strategy hooks for us to be able to make systemic changes in that area?

MR MARK ROSE: Well -

20 **COMMISSIONER LOVETT:** Around curriculum and all that kind of stuff. We are in 2024 now, sorry, we're talking over each other.

25 **MR MARK ROSE:** The Marrung Policy is the best policy I've ever seen and I must admit without admitting to plagiarism, the frameworks of that I applied in the Deakin strategy, Indigenous strategy. So those hooks are great as drivers but to become a teacher you need registration. There's separate accrediting bodies. VCAA is terrific in the work that they do and they meet regularly with us and as I said, I sit on the board.

30 There is Academy of Teaching and Learning that exists in the State. I would like to see them work with seasoned teachers to build up their schools a lot more and I hope that the work of universities in preparation, is more cutting edge than it has been in the past, that teachers emerging from teacher training courses or initial teacher education courses are given the best and the tools to equip.

35 But nothing is better, from the national curriculum we talk about the Martini glass, it's a bit late at night and Martini should be the last thing on my mind but we start with a big topic such as Stolen Generations and we ask teachers to funnel it down to a place-based response. We are talking Stolen Generations and you're talking Geelong. Geelong had 12 teachers, so the work of the LAECGs in giving that tone and texture to the drivers of curriculum is vital.

40 **MR DARREN LOVETT:** Yeah. Thank you.

45 **MR GOODWIN:** And I wanted to quickly discuss, and this goes to some of the questions that were being asked before about the governance arrangements for Marrung, that's on page 33 of the strategy. And then if we can just focus on the top half of the page. So there are - there's a governance structure that involves the LAECGs and Koori education round tables chaired by VAEAI, regional

Partnership Forums co-chaired by the Department of Education and VAEAI, the Marrung committee co-chaired by the department secretary and by you as president, Auntie Gerry, and then that reports into the Education State Board. And then there's an annual ministerial round table.

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I was just interested on your reflections on how that governance structure has worked in practice over the past eight years and, in particular, things that have worked and potentially things that government can do better to strengthen those arrangements?

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MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: A lot of that actually comes back to our own planning from a community viewpoint in the sense that you mentioned the Koori education round tables, the way I came up with that idea at a forum in Echuca. All right. And the idea was - because when LAECGs were first formed in our local communities, really it was provided the only platform for communities to have a voice. There was nothing. There was no co-ops and no local co-ops and committees. So what we - but that's now grown where you have Aboriginal cooperates everywhere across the State, not everywhere, but in most centres across the State. You have growth of committees.

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So the call on the Aboriginal voice is out there. But also at the same time, if you are going to have input from a community viewpoint you need to include everyone. Self-determination is about including everyone. And the idea of having everyone sitting at the table and that was the idea. So although VAEAI chairs that committee, it invites right across the board, any group within that jurisdiction of that area, local area to come to the table to share their view on what's needed in education for themselves, their community, their children and their families and that's the whole idea of that structure.

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And if you have a look at the structures that we have, you just mentioned them, the LAECGs, Koori education round tables, the joint partnerships at the regional level, chaired by LAECGs representatives and a regional director who is a very senior person and involves all of ever management that responsibly office. There's four regions in the whole State and the senior one, the central governance committee, co-chaired by Geraldine. So you have community input right across the whole spectrum and that's what that is about.

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AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: Within that central governance committee there's all of the Victorian State governmental people are represented. Sorry, they have, you they have high positions within those - within those departments. Then they sit at our table at our central governance, so they contribute. As we said, education is holistic and has to take into consideration all of those other issues as well. So we have people like crim justice, through health, through all of those government departments, they sit at our governance, our central governance round table.

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So they're all represented, and not only that, but the State-wide Koori organisations, their representatives also sit at that table as well. So we all discuss all the issues that are pertinent to education at that table that's going to impact maybe from their departments to our - to the education departments. So they
 5 contribute. So the process along the way, that's what our process is, within that diagram. Then there's the ministerial round table, that's when the Minister gets to hear what's happening. So that he knows what's happening on the ground within our regions, within our schools. And that's - and it comes through that process.

10 **MR GOODWIN:** And an element of the strategy makes clear that part of the governance framework has been established to ensure that government is held accountable by the local communities involved, and by VAEAI as well as the peak body. And the strategy mentions that, and the accountability framework requires a succinct and focused set of performance measures, this is on page 32 for
 15 Commissioners, in the third paragraph:

"And the capacity for relevant data and information to be provided to local communities, to better inform conversations about progress to date and forward action and a mechanism for feedback from communities."

20 Do you feel as though there has been, from government, the appropriate amount of data sharing to allow, or to inform local communities about the performance of government against the strategy?

25 **AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON:** You really want me to answer?

MR GOODWIN: It's a truth-telling Commission.

30 **MR LIONEL BAMBLETT:** I think Mark said it before, saying on the screen, saying in the data that we tend to be able to get is usually 10 months, 12 months old. Right, from a State level. From the Commonwealth level is normally two years. So you're working in arrears really, because that data is 12 months old. But also at the same time it is a planning - it allows a planning block, right, that you're able to use, utilise. But it would be far better if we could have real-time data as
 35 you progress.

40 But I don't think they - through their structures, the way the education system is structured that they can actually obtain real-time data in that fashion. Right. So it would be good if they could, but probably - and Mark stated that before when he made a presentation.

45 **AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON:** I think it's really important. I think that that's one of the things that we need and I think that we have always needed and it's been hard to get, really, is real-time data. And that - when we talk about that data, that's our data. That's our sovereignty data. We should have access to that data, because that then informs how we do and how we operate our programs, and

how we can make improvements. So that's why I said did you really want me to answer.

MR GOODWIN: Mark, did you have anything to add? I saw you nodding.

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MR MARK ROSE: I'm just in total agreement. But with the, in the era of dashboards, I don't envisage that in the future that won't all be a problem that we will be able to have a direct feed from a centralised dashboard from the department. But the point I made before that if something does happen, we hear about it real quick, real fast at VAEAI and we can respond to issues ahead of data and ahead of processes. So the VAEAI decision is really rich and dynamic. But I would hope to see some more interactive dashboard going forward, maybe in Marrung too.

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MR GOODWIN: Yes. On that which was going to be really my last question on the strategy, what are some of your key desires for the next strategy, if there is to be one, given that Marrung finishes in 2026? That's an open question to anyone, if anyone wants to answer.

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AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: I think what Mark talked about earlier and I think that's really important, and I think that with - what we need to look at is about that initial teacher training. I think that what we need to do is ensure that we either to grow our own or what we do is we have to ensure that those teachers that are going to graduate from those universities and go into teaching in our schools are very much aware of the children that they're going to be teaching, and that's our children, our Aboriginal and not only Aboriginal, but our Torres Strait Islander children that live here as well.

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So I think that's one of the really important things is that initial teacher education training, is something that we should look at. And I think that we have a place with, because we do, Lionel said earlier, we work with three ministers of education. We work with early childhood, training and the Department of Education. So I think that we have an opportunity with those three, working within those three areas, to then influence what comes next in our next strategy. It's going to improve our next strategy to ensure that we get that data, to ensure that what we do is we are getting from early childhood, we are getting our children into schools, that are ready for them. That are ready for them. Okay. No good looking at them and saying, "Are they school ready?" Are the schools ready for them? That's really important. So that's what we need to be making sure of.

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We need to be making sure that our children are able to be comfortable in their skin, they are able to identify as Aboriginal students and be proud to stand up and say who they belong to and where they come from, so in that classroom. You know, grade 1, grade 2, grade 3. That's really important. They're - those are the foundational levels. What we need to be able to do is ensure that we have our kids so that - you mentioned, you know, you talked about the year 9. Year 9 is

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always - I've worked in school, I know what it's like. I know some schools that deliberately built schools separate for year 9 students. They have.

5 So that's a real problem area. But what we need to do is we need to be able to make sure that wherever our kids are or wherever they go that, you know, they are being - you know they're able to access school freely, that they're able to feel wanted in that school, that they are able to relate to that school, that that school is engaging with them. That school is also teaching them, you know, learning -
10 teaching them. Not just having them sit in the classroom but being sure that they're, you know, that they're developing year by year by year by year. That's what should be happening with all of our kids, that we have that, and we have the data to show that that's happening, so that we can say yeah our kids are progressing really well through.

15 So I think there are lots of things that we can deal with in the next Marrung strategy. I think the things that we've learned over these last 10 years - and Lionel said before, we will have a 10-year period. We'll have that data from Marrung that's going to assist us in informing our next strategy and how we make it work better for our students; how we make it better for all, you know, all sectors of
20 education.

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Can I jump in? How - in a shared future, we talked about a shared future through truth and Treaty how do we keep government accountable for what they commit to? So there's a lot of onus on Aboriginal
25 organisations, youse in particular, but others have come forward a deeper accountability, where our people are on the ground. We hear from them. But government don't seem to be at a lot of the other tables and being accountable for the delivery of their side of the strategy. So what does that look like? Any thoughts on that?
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AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: I think - you know what I think? I think that we've worked really hard over the years, VAEAI, over 40 something years. What we have learned to be able to do is develop relationships and not just with one particular party or the other. But develop those relationships in relation to
35 what's best for the education of our children and what's best that will work for them, not, you know sort of - it's how you want to reach your goals and it's how you want to build relationships with people that are influential to be able to ensure that you do. I think - look, I'm not talking about any other organisation, I don't know, you know, how they operate, that's their business.
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COMMISSIONER LOVETT: I'll ask everyone the same question.

AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: Okay. I'm just telling you that - what I've learned and I've learned from some very, very, very, very good people. I've had
45 some really great mentors, and following their lead, and being shown how you operate and work with people, that's, I think, is what happens. I think that's how you do it. It's no good - you know like, I can lose my cool sometimes, but what's

the point? You know, sometimes you just - you've got to make sure that the point that you're raising is, in fact, one that is going to make a difference; one that you really feel passionate about and that you know yourself is going to get that difference.

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COMMISSIONER NORTH: I'm really interested in this point, because I wonder if it relates to the length of the Marrung period of the program. Because my experience, it hasn't been in education, but my experience of government is that there is an enormous churn. And so I'm sort of amazed to hear that you have built up relationships where the picture is in generally dealing with government, you're dealing with one dep sec for six months and then they go off and then someone else comes in or an ED who's there and then gone and, of course, it's really disruptive. But you seem to have got a dynamism with the relationships. How do you navigate the churn or isn't there churn in that?

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MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: It is the policy, the structured policy. Individuals come and go, and they always do. A dep sec will transfer to a region, they'll go. Someone else will take their place. The community remains. The systems remain. But you've got to have the structures to enable you to have a voice at the table to actually look at those dialogues. That's - and that's what we are also hoping and probably part of the response to your question too, is that we're hoping that - and you're saying that we have that structure and all that, and we've worked damn long and hard to develop that. But we are also hopeful that Treaty will lend to that so that we're growing that community voice into the processes across the board.

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Because whether it's education, whether it's health, whether it's child welfare it's all part of our life and it's part of our community and we have got to have the families and community voice at the table to actually change that, right. Whether it's sitting at an actual table, but having dialogue and that's basically what it is. Right.

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AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: And it's how you use that dialogue. You talk about building relationships and it is, and there's a turnover and believe me, you get weary sometimes because you think, "No, I have to educate another minister or I have to educate a" - but you do it. You do it. You know why you do it? You do it because you know it needs to be done. You do it because you know that the policies and strategies that we have put in place have stood the test of time. They've come from, you know they've come from years of hard work from all those people that we've talked about. And we intend for them to - we won't let them go because, you know, some really good people stood behind those and they deserve to be acknowledged for it.

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MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Before you move on from that, because it has to do with outcome from Treaty negotiations and all of those things and it's about cultural reaffirmation and all that cultural affirmation. I'm also on the Parkville School Council. Right. I was recommended by the Minister, so I'm on the

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Parkville School Council and so I go to those meetings as well and interact with the folks there, the young people, right. The numbers fluctuate and grow in Parkville. So December last year, November - December last year it fell to eight across the board, Parkville and also in Cherry Creek versus - they have closed
 5 Malmsbury now, you've got Cherry Creek. In late January it jumped back to 30. So eight to 30.

On speaking with some of those young folk in there, it's about culture and it's about cultural affirmation. I've spoken with a young guy in there one day, you
 10 know, I accidently walked passed and I said, "How are you going?" And he just stopped like that. He told me his entire life story, who he was, his family, but not his cultural framework. And in his life, that's what's missing.

We have also got to remember when we are planning all this and part of the idea of that partnership and education is this: We live in the most dispersed Aboriginal
 15 population in the country in Victoria. Make no bones about that, we actually do. Right. If you want to have a look at the enrolment numbers in schools, the majority of our children go to school not where there's larger numbers, the Shepparton tech school or, it's not called tech school.

20 **AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON:** Super school.

MR LIONEL BAMBLETT: Tech school was back in my day. But the individual children out in schools and families, that's a clear indication that
 25 families live out in the boondocks. Right. We've got to be able to reach out, into those communities. But not only - if we can't reach out to them, what Mark was talking about was teacher training, so that when the new teachers come through, they are going into the schools with a knowledge base to be able to interact in a culturally relevant way with that student and with that family.

30 So we have got to look at how we do that and that's about cultural affirmation. We will do that and VAEAI is developing a strategy around that, which hopefully we'll talk - doesn't matter. But anyways, about cultural reaffirmation because we have got to look at how we actually start connecting our children back into their
 35 cultural framework, otherwise folks, we're in trouble, to be quite honest and so, yeah, I'll just leave it at that.

MR GOODWIN: Yeah, Mark.

40 **MR MARK ROSE:** Lionel's points about the cultural reaffirmation are so very, very important. But I also want to answer the question about the churn that, the relationship - turning to your question, the relationship continues because of the hard work that Lionel and Geraldine do in building relationships. You try and get
 45 in their diaries for a lunch. It's impossible. They work tirelessly. When Lionel was afforded the honorary PhD, I did a back of the envelope compilation of (crosstalk) how many Ministers Lionel dealt with personally. It was over 40. So

the churn is there, but VAEAI and led by Lionel and Geraldine are the permanent residents.

I wonder if I could address what should be in Marrung too. I would like to look at
 5 the eco system that surrounds the Department, the statutory authorities, et cetera.
 We flow that VRQA and VCAA really do great work and they relate to VAEAI in
 consultation. But I would love to see each of those have a game changer plan each
 other year. I'm sorry, Lionel, I'm creating more work for you. But if they come
 up with a game changer strategy, an example that would be the Alpine School of
 10 Leadership. After the first 10 years - it's a school that mirrors the private schools
 away for a term in year 9 that Geraldine spoke about of.

The Alpine School of Leadership came to VAEAI after 10 years and said, "How
 15 come we have only had one Aboriginal kid come through the system?" Now
 there's a dynamic relationship. I am - I was going to say exiled. But I'm having a
 sabbatical, because of the strain from being president of that school. But no
 Koori kid who has gone to the Alpine school has not made it to year 12 and that is
 kind of like the glue of that holds a lot of other kids together. And in that process,
 that program, there is a little bit of cultural reaffirmation, but it's a frontier we need
 20 to address in the future.

MR GOODWIN: Thank you. Commissioners, those were my questions unless
 the Commissioners have any? No? Just leaves us to thank our witnesses and have
 a drink of water.

25

COMMISSIONER NORTH: Thank you, Mark, for getting up early or late.

MR GOODWIN: I think it's just after 2 am.

MR MARK ROSE: The happy hour is over too, can I just say that. No, well
 30 worth it. And you know I just want to - and a final word. Being around VAEAI
 for just on 30 years I've seen it move from a political organisation into a cutting
 edge policy and advocacy that has made such deliberate changes in the life of our
 kids and every kid in the State has benefitted from the work of VAEAI.

35

MR GOODWIN: If the Commission pleases, what will happen is I call for
 a 15-minute video of Aunty Lois Peeler's evidence be played, which will be
 followed by a 35-minutes video of Jarvis Atkinson's evidence to be played. And
 at the conclusion the hearing will conclude to tomorrow at 10 am on 5 June.

40

AUNTY GERALDINE ATKINSON: I just want to say thank you very much
 for linking to us. I do tend to ramble on a bit but never mind. Thanks.

MR MARK ROSE: Goodbye, everybody.

45

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: It's online.

COMMISSIONER WALTER: It will be online, yes.

<VIDEO PLAYED

5 (Dr Lois Peeler speaking)

From the earliest days of colonisation, the generally accepted view held by the colonisers was that the Aboriginal population would eventually die out. So it was that up until the 1960s Australian governments held that Aboriginal children should be offered minimal schooling. This and subsequent government policies
10 infused with racist views have impacted the ability of Aboriginal children to thrive in this sphere of education.

Across Aboriginal society, we have a holistic view, which refers to the physical, social, emotional and cultural wellbeing and a key element in the ability of a child
15 to thrive and yet when we look at the effect of past government policies, such as the Aborigines Act 1910 and the subsequent acts, regulations have had a devastating impact on many families leading to dislocation and fragmentation in Victorian communities. One such regulation in 1916 ordered that all quadroon, octoroon and half-caste lads over 18 on the board stations shall leave and shall not
20 be allowed on the station or reserve again, except for brief visits to family at the discretion of the station manager.

From the earliest days, government policies have impacted the health, social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal children and families. There are numerous
25 stories of the negative effect of policies on families that tore families apart and prevented children from thriving. My own family story is that of my grandfather a Yarra Yarra man who grew up in the Coranderrk Children's Dormitory.

The stated aim of the education program at that time was to convert children into
30 modern citizens through a program that combined physical exercise and outdoor labour with classroom instruction. The boys were taught to be farm labourers and the girls to be domestic servants. Their formal education stopped at grade 3 level. Once the young people reached the age of 14, they were compelled to leave and to find a job away from family and community.

35

In 1937, the Australian Aborigines League issued a statement that read:

*"It is an open secret that dark children are not to receive education beyond the
40 third grade, and they are not getting it in the schools conducted by the department."*

We claim that our children should get the full opportunity of attaining the fullest primary education and for secondary education where the capacity is evident. Our
45 people say that they want their children to be able to become doctors and nurses and teachers and so on. Just as it has been possible for other natives of Fijian, Indian, and so on.

The role and opportunity of education appears to have been well understood by many Aboriginal families. While the benefits of an education were known and desired, the increasing policy of child removal under what was called the Neglected Children's Act made sending children off to a known place at regular times a fearful activity. Families lived in fear of children being taken away.

Elders recall being told to run and hide whenever they heard a motor car. Many children experienced broken education to stay ahead of the welfare seeking to remove those children from their families. Our people took work wherever they could, and many families moved in search of seasonal work. They moved around to work as shearers, wood-cutters, canary workers, fruit pickers, pea pickers, tomato pickers and tobacco workers and more.

Regardless of risks and the moving about in response to seasonal work, many families made great efforts to send their children to school. An Elder recalls, "My mother and father moved quite a bit looking for work. And during my primary school years I attended 11 schools." I authored the collection of oral histories of Elders who lived on the flats between Mooroopna and Shepparton where many recalled their memories of school. Kids from the flat would walk along the highway to the Mooroopna school. We had to walk on the highway as there were too many swaggies and transient labourers along the bush track, so we were not allowed to walk that way.

We walked to school in a group, probably about 10 or 11 of us. I remember being soaking wet after walking to school in the rain. The white kids were sent home, but we had to sit there all day in wet clothes. An Elder remembered when at the age of around seven years of age, his mother went to enrol him at the Mooroopna Primary School. The headmaster said, "We don't want you here" and slammed the door on her. That would have been around 1941.

Another Elder recalled that racism was embedded in the school experience, "My experience at school was terrible. We had a lot of trouble there. We were treated badly and called all sorts of names. It wasn't only the kids, it was the teachers too. And one particular teacher would never give the little bottle of flavoured milk to the Koori kids."

"We knew we were Aborigines and we didn't want to be anything else. Although we had hard times when the children came home from schools that was the reason we sent them away, they'd come home and say the children were calling them and how the teachers didn't help them at all when they would go to them. They would just tell them to run outside. So we knew we were Aborigines and we were proud of it."

Another recalled that at five years of age the teacher gave her the strap because she couldn't do her sums. It was apparently quite common to be called up before the class to get the strap by the teacher for your inability to do work. The school

curriculum portrayed Aboriginal people in a derogatory manner and Aboriginal perspectives were not included.

5 Nothing was ever permanent for our people. Men often had to leave the family to follow the work, as shearers, forest workers. And families moved frequently to find seasonal work. Following the epic Cummeragunja Walk Off in 1939, the Barma Public School did not allow Aboriginal children into the school. This was the period of the development of Aboriginal activism. It was my dad's sister, Auntie Hyllus Briggs, my sister Hyllus's name sake who established a school under
10 the bow shed for the Aboriginal children from Cummeragunja whose families camped on the Riverbank.

Auntie Hyllus went on to be a member of the Australian Aborigines League along with others from Aboriginal communities across the State who fought for better
15 conditions for our people. The Australian Aborigines League was an Aboriginal-led organisation, established in 1933. The AAL platform cast a light on the unjust treatment of Aboriginal people and campaigned for the repeal of discriminatory legislation, enfranchisement, land rights and representation in Parliament.

20 A letter to the Shepparton news on 21 February 1946 by Uncle Shadrach James stated:

25 *"The Aborigines of this community have formed an Aboriginal progressive association, attended by leading Aboriginal citizens of this district. The objects of the association are to improve our standard of living, socially, morally, intellectually and spiritually, to secure better facilities for improving our secondary and technical education with the possibility of entering universities."*

30 The experience of life on the flats and schooling at that time was the catalyst for the establishment of an Aboriginal school in Victoria that encompassed academic learning, health and wellbeing, and cultural pride to develop future leaders:

(Auntie Hyllus Briggs speaking)
35 *"Because it was a new idea. It was a new idea in education for Aboriginals to have their very own school and a new idea is something that people are not sure of, will it work, are the children going to like going to a school where they are going to be in another place away from the family and I guess that we had to prove to them that it was workable. So we had to do pilot projects and after three
40 years pilot project they could see it was going to be something that they would be proud of to have their own Aboriginal school. And it was very difficult, I must say, in the beginning because of that new idea. There's never been another school, another Aboriginal school in the history of Victoria, actually. But now it's something where people want to send their children to. They're very proud of it."*

45 (Dr Lois Peeler speaking)

Worawa Aboriginal College was established in 1983 to provide a holistic model of education. Based on lived experience of the founder, Hyllus Maris and with the support of non-Aboriginal people who, under the philosophy of walking together to make a difference, supported the vision of an Aboriginal school. After 40 years
 5 Worawa remains Victoria's only Aboriginal school and consistent with self-determination is registered with the Victorian registration and qualifications authority as an independent school.

10 It has not been plain sailing for this Aboriginal-led initiative. With opposition from many sectors of the community. The Worawa education model is a holistic approach. Aboriginal retention rates in education is a factor of social and emotional wellbeing, and the continuing disadvantage Aboriginal people face in the general community. Racism remains an issue across the education sector. An incident brought to my attention recently involved a schoolyard fight where
 15 a young Aboriginal girl was bashed, which was filmed and uploaded to social media.

The school did not take action, and it was escalated to higher authority. A school in another region had a similar incident, but had taken no action to resolve the
 20 issue. The Eastern Regional Aboriginal Justice Advisory Committee is currently implementing Lotjapadhan, a restorative justice pilot across the region. The RAJAC has approached the Attorney-General to change legislation from an opt-in to an opt-out process.

25 Restorative practice also known as group conferencing, requires the voluntarily involvement of all parties which, in a school situation, voluntary involvement can be difficult to obtain. There is a myriad of reasons why even today our achievement in Aboriginal education, whilst growing, has a long way to go. There is no doubt that Victorian government regulations contributed to the low
 30 socio-economic position of Aboriginal people today, including family breakdown, poverty, homelessness, health, housing, and education, and alienation which, in turn, contributes to the low level of academic achievement and the high incarceration rate of Aboriginal people.

35 **<VIDEO CONCLUDED**

<VIDEO PLAYED

(JARVIS ATKINSON speaking)

40 So my name is Jarvis Atkinson, I'm a proud Yorta Yorta man from Shepparton, Cummeragunja. There was heaps of challenges as an Aboriginal man growing up. Starting in a mainstream school, I already felt like I had a challenge ahead of me. I felt like the teachers were already expecting me to not succeed in school. I felt like they looked at me like I was going to be a problem for them, and that their
 45 interest in helping me, you know, progress through school wasn't - wasn't there. My interest wasn't there, because the school system and the teachers had no

interest in me. It was a challenge for me every day just to get up and go to school, because I felt like it was hard for me to ask for help.

5 I felt like they weren't interested in helping me. My growth and my progress in school wasn't at their best interest. They talked to us differently. The connection wasn't there. I'm a real strong observer, and as a child, I used to observe my environments a lot as well, and you know, I really - it really stood out to me how other children that were non - that were non-Indigenous how they were treated, compared to how I seen my cousins get treated and how I was treated and how he spoke to one - to these children and then spoke to us in a different way.

10 And, you know, it really stood out to me. I ended up being expelled from high school, you know, in year 8, and I actually, I got into an altercation with the teacher, and a teacher, you know, manhandled me and grabbed me around the scruff of the neck in front of 200 students, and, you know, held me down and was screaming in my face and I - I retaliated. And, you know, so I ended up being expelled.

15 And, you know, I remember after getting expelled my whole, my whole life changed from - from that day. You know, I started engaging with people that were, you know, I can identify with, people that were also expelled out of school, people that also found it hard to, you know, find support and find interest in them areas, and, you know, that led to me, you know, hanging around people that were doing the wrong thing.

20 You know, I got caught up in drugs and crime, you know, looking back, on you know how the lack of support, you know, from the teachers in the mainstream schooling was - was definitely a big - plays a big factor in the way, you know, my direction in my life went the way it did. I really feel like it had a big influence on the way my life went.

25 My first ever experience in coming into contact with the police, you know, I was riding a bicycle without a helmet and I remember getting pulled over, and I remember the officers, you know, giving me a warning but it wasn't, you know - it was a warning in telling me to make sure I wear a helmet next time but I knew straightaway that the interaction was very passive and aggressive, and it wasn't a warning for my safety. It was a warning as if to say, you know, "Don't let us come into contact with you, you know, doing the wrong thing again or we're going to come down on you like a tonne of bricks." And I think that was one of their words at one stage was, you know, if they catch me again without a helmet, it won't look good for me. You know, it was a threat. Authorities already proved to me in the education system and growing up that they didn't have my best interests at heart and so I was seeing authorities through a lens where they - they weren't there to look out for me. They weren't there to keep me safe.

40 Me and a couple of cousins one night were down the street and were getting up to no good, and a police officer pulled us over and a lot of my cousins took off

running and I got caught by the police. And the police come up to me and grabbed me around the scuff of my neck and stood on my toes and he was, like, punching me, in the face. And I remember him saying to me, you know, calling me little black this, little black that, and more or less chucking me in the divvy and taking me back to the cells. I was only probably like 16, you know, 15, 16 at the time. And looking at the other police officers that was with him, you know, the fact that he didn't even try pulling him up and try and stop - you know, I was almost looking to the other police officer for help, you know, and he didn't even pull his colleague up. You know, and that made me feel even worse.

10 I didn't come out of it thinking I needed to be very careful about doing the wrong thing. I came out of that interaction just being really cautious about, you know, coming in contact with police again. You know, I wasn't given no - you know, I wasn't - you know, it wasn't like they - they gave me a talk and said, "This is wrong what you're doing, you know, you shouldn't do this or you might end up like this." There was none of that.

20 It was just - you know, I was manhandled, I was threatened. And, yeah, I just remember feeling so, like, I just grew this hatred for the police. I started to drink more. I started to experiment with drugs and marijuana, and my crime was very frequent. And I became a lot more frequently being pulled over since that first time, the first time I got arrested because now my name was on the books. And whenever they'd see me, they'd would pull me over. Even if I wasn't doing nothing wrong they'd just pull me over and they'd search my pockets.

25 Fast forward a bit and go to the first time I, you know, I was actually arrested on a serious crime. I was arrested for armed robbery and by this time I was, you know, I was fully addicted to ice, fully addicted to, you know, tablets and alcohol. And, you know, there wasn't very - there wasn't very much a drug I didn't use at the time and my crime was very survival. You know, I depended on my crime to survive. And I was kept in the Shepparton cells for 28 days. And the first time I was arrested for a serious crime, I was 28.

35 But by this time I was, you know, I had - I had numbers of charges, you know. My charge sheet was getting really big, and, you know, from stealing bikes to stealing cars to drink driving to, you know, assaults and fights, and verbal threats and stuff like that. And at that time you weren't like, you weren't meant to be kept that long in the cells, you know and I thought I was going to die in the Shepparton cells. And, you know, it was hell. It was hell, and it wasn't a hell in terms of making me not want to do that anymore, it was just hell that I was - I was now part of their system. I didn't have no rehabilitation. I just had more or less clean time up, you know. And I was - and it wasn't long after being released where I reoffended and I was back in prison. From 2012 to 2018 I was in and out of prison every year and I applied to go to Odyssey House Rehabilitation Centre, and I got bailed and I was released from Port Philip prison and bailed to Odyssey House.

And, yeah, so I went to Odyssey House for eight months and I basically was there, I was there for all the wrong reasons. I was there to just get out of court. And so when my corrections order finished and I was no longer, you know, expected to stay there, I left the program and I - it wasn't long after that where I reoffended and relapsed and ended up back in prison again.

I really felt, I really could see myself just going around in circles in this system, you know. And, you know, I knew all I had to do at this time was miss an appointment and I'd end up back in prison. You know, I just had to miss one corrections appointment. I didn't even have to reoffend. I just have to miss an appointment and I'd be back in prison, you know. And that's when I started to realise that I was really - I was really at war with the system. And I was expected to navigate through this life and do the best as possible in an environment that was set up for us to fail.

I couldn't see a way out. So I started to accept of this person I created through the drugs and the crime and being in the system, I was really starting to embrace this person. So there was a period of time where I was homeless for eight years, you know, I was on the streets and I was couch surfing. I burnt all my bridges, you know. All the trust I had in my community, I went back to my mothers, you know, I've already made 100 promises before that, that, you know, I was really going to give it a try this time, mum.

I ended up coming home to my mother's house one night and, you know, my mother couldn't have me there no more, and I was a liability and I was very unsafe, and she got sick of coming and seeing my in the cells and she said she can't have me there no more, I wasn't welcome there no longer. So I ended up coming down the city, down to Melbourne, and I ended up being homeless down here on the streets and I was actually living down Flinders Street and if you know Sea life and the Crown Casino, the train track bridge that goes from Flinders to across Sea Life and that, I was living under there.

I can remember, you know, sleeping in a park and the rain coming down and I was that exhausted, that exhausted and that hungry, that I couldn't even move. You know, I just had to lay there in the rain. You know, and I just remember feeling so like, yeah, just so - so not cared about and so lost. And, you know, for eight years I was homeless, you know. And, like I said, you know I was eight months on the streets of Melbourne, you know, sleeping in alleyways and out on the footpath in front of the public.

And, yeah, just, I really feel like the housing system really failed me in that - that time, you know. I feel like there should have been more opportunities for me to have more respite from the streets, you know; whether it was a motel here and there, whether it was some sort of respite facility, you know, especially in the regional towns you know there's not many places where I could go and shower, where I could go and wash my clothes, where I could go and, you know, eat something.

- And in this time I overdosed probably about five - five times. I woke up, probably like three times in hospital. I woke up in - in the Alfred Hospital twice and St Vincent's once. And I remember the last time I overdosed, I woke up in the Alfred
- 5 Hospital and I remember waking up and looking down at my - my name tag and it said "Unknown". And it really just shocked me, and I ended up asking the nurse, "How did I get here?", you know, and she said, "You were found face down on the train tracks at Flinders Street station" and it really just shocked me, you know.
- 10 I remember asking God, you know, like, why am I still waking up, you know? Why am I still here? And I remember thinking to myself, I could actually die right now. I could actually die and my children wouldn't even know where I am. My family wouldn't even know. And no one would even know who I am, and, you know. But I remember thinking a part of me knew something had to change; that
- 15 a part of me felt so stuck and so stuck and so - so out of options. I just, I walked out, straight out of the hospital. I was bare feet in the road, pulling all the tubes out myself, the drip and all that stuff, and I just walked out. And I ended up back down on the streets.
- 20 I remember going and calling my mother and she said to me, "We've got some exciting news for you. You've - we got some mail from housing. You've got a house", you know. And this was eight years, I was on the waiting list for, and I finally got this place and I had all these good intentions. And it was
- 25 a three-bedroom place and, you know, I remember just grabbing little that I had, a little red bag full of stuff, little bits of clothes that I had and I jumped off them pylons and I went back to the train station, no money and I went straight on the train and I went straight back to Shepparton.
- I remember telling my kids and that, you know, I've finally got a place for us, I'm
- 30 going to do the right thing, and I had all these good intentions, you know, to do the right thing but I was still stuck in the system. I was still a statistic, and I was still, you know, very much more than ever addicted to drugs. I wasn't just addicted to like ice and tablets and alcohol and marijuana. Now I had a heroin habit from being in the city. And it wasn't much longer where the drugs took over that place,
- 35 you know, and I started opening my doors up to all the wrong people. And I ended up back down and out again. And so, you know, I felt guilt, I felt bad because I let my kids down again, and, you know, I was out doing crime and that again.
- 40 So I ended up committing another serious crime, another armed robbery. I knew that I was going to go for a long time because this was my second armed robbery, and my criminal history was very extensive now. And so what happened was I ended up getting caught by the police. I ended up being back in the Shepparton cells and I remember just sitting in there defeated, you know, and accepting, and I
- 45 was ready to do a long time. Like, I was starting to accept that this is my life and it's never going to change. And my fire was getting dimmer inside of me to fight to break that cycle, you know.

And I remember the trapdoor came down in the cells and the police officer said "Jarvis, there's someone here to see you." I went into the visitors' box and I sat down and a drug and alcohol worker from Odyssey House came back and she seen me. And she said, "You know, you should give Odyssey house another go." And I said, "No way." I knew how hard this program was - is. And what it would have needed, how much commitment it would have needed from me.

And she said to me, "Do you remember when your son came and visited you in 2015/2016." And I - so in 2015, Christmas time, there was at Odyssey House my son came and seen me, and in the front foyer they had a wishing tree, a prayer tree, and on that tree the visitors that came Christmastime could write a wish or a prayer and hang it on the tree. And my son wrote on a piece of paper, "All I want is for my dad to stay off the drugs forever." And I sort of forgot about it and she reminded me. She said, "Do you remember the wish your son made, the prayer your son made?" And it just broke me, you know, I just started crying and it gave me the strength and lit that fire up in me to pick up the pen and sign the application to go back to Odyssey.

And it wasn't a given that the judge was going to bail me there. On the 1st of March 2018 I got accepted back to Odyssey House and I got bailed and I went there and I ended up doing three years in this program and I completed it. I graduated and, you know, I haven't looked back since. You know, my whole life, you know - you know like I said, in school where, you know, I was - I was expected to fail and I was expected to be a problem and I wasn't expected to make it, you know.

People, a lot of people really didn't have hope in me succeeding in life, and, you know, I - at times in my life, you know, people, you know, I had family members that really thought that I would never change, really thought that I would die the way I was living, you know. That was really - they had fears that they were going to bury me. I had Auntys and Uncles saying to me, you know, "Are we going to be coming to your funeral next?"

And just having someone like that drug and alcohol worker that came and seen me, and, you know, I was at my lowest of the lowest, and you know I really didn't at that stage - at times I didn't think I could change. There was someone that didn't give up on me and there was someone that was still - that was still interested enough to go out of their way to come and see me and tell me to give Odyssey another go. You know, it was so - it was so empowering at that time. I was homeless.

You know' I dropped out of school early. You know, a criminal record. You know, I was in all these areas, and so I was up against this person, you know, I knew, when I went back to Odyssey House, that I had to break down this person. I had to break down this person that I've created, that the system created. And so I knew I had to be really - I had to change the way I walked. I had to change the

way I talked. I had to change the way I dressed. I had to change the way I thought about myself. You know, so it was a constant battle. You know.

5 So I was doing all these external challenges in-house, you know, engaging in the program, using the groups. I was very committed, you know, I didn't - I couldn't see the end of it. I - you know, I - I wasn't - I just knew that I wasn't going to see it through whatever - whatever challenges I came - that came up against me, whatever walls I had to climb, whatever mountains I had to climb, and it was massive.

10 You know, I knew that this was my turnaround. I was encouraged through the whole program. I was guided, I was supported - culturally. You know, we had the Buladu Ngarrgu program once a week where we could engage in culture, and I was on my healing journey. You know, I was - I knew that I was going to heal, 15 you know. I was learning new life skills in there. I was learning routine and structure, and most of all I was learning values, you know. What I had to do is I had to set myself role models within this program.

20 And in this program there's levels in the program. You know, there's foundations and there's level 1 and there's level 2 and level 3 and then there's levers, and each level had leaders, you know, and it made it possible for me to vision where I wanted to go in the program.

25 You know, like, for example, a big role model and a big inspiration to me was the drug and alcohol worker. She actually was a resident at Odyssey House as well and she came out the other side of it. And I guess that helped me really conceive that it was possible. There is another sense to the program where you can be influenced in the wrong way as well.

30 So it was up to me to really identify the leaders in the program versus the people that were there, like I was in my first program. So I knew the person I was in there the first time and that was the person I didn't want to follow. You know, in this program, I learnt a lot of skills. I learnt, you know, a lot of property and development maintenance skills. I learnt how to, you know, I worked in the 35 children's centre there at the program. I worked in the kitchen. I learnt, you know, a lot of kitchenhand stuff and I learnt a lot of conflict resolution skills, therapy skills, you know, and a lot of just facilitation skills.

40 And whilst I was in level 3 I went back and studied. So I went to uni and I went and studied AOD, alcohol and other drugs and I got my cert IV in that. And that was massive for me, because I dropped out of school in year 7, year 8 and I never thought I would even think about going back and putting my head down and trying to study and I built up the confidence to go back to uni and complete my cert IV.

45 I was really supported. You know, the other people in the class, the non-Indigenous, you know, students in the class was really embracing me. They

were really good. I think too given the fact, it depends what the subject is, because AOD, they know that it's a high - our people - they know they're going to be working with our people. So I really felt like their support was filtered through a lot of that as well.

5

But I had one really close friend in there. She supported me through the whole thing, you know. She really batted for me and she really helped me get over, you know, where I struggled. Over time she studied with me and she helped me get my assignments in on time and she was really genuine, you know. And she's non-Indigenous, but she's got a strong passion for our people and I really feel like we need more non-Indigenous people like her. But it was great in there. I could embrace my story, my journey and I was almost like an assignment for them, you know. I was, you know. Like everything I was learning about was exactly me, you know and it was just blowing me away, like I was learning so much about myself in there as well.

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Just realising how important it is to have a number of networks and they have to be healthy networks, you know. Coming out of that environment and coming back into this environment, I really had to be aware of all my triggers, you know, people, places and things. I've learnt leadership roles now in my community, you know. People look up to me in my job role and you know, all the kids, you know, call me Uncle. I have so much of a desire and a passion after, you know, looking up to strong role models and leaders in community and just to one day be able to, like, walk in their footsteps, you know, fill their shoes. And I feel like I'm sort of just on the tip of it at the moment, just starting to take up and play my part in that and I know I've got plenty more to do and plenty more fights and plenty more opportunities to lead our people.

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When I was studying AOD I used to catch the bus from Odyssey House every day into Swinbourne. I saw this spray-paint tag on a wall and it said, "Treaty." And I remember just sitting on that bus every day for six months straight thinking, "How can I play my part?" I could hear my people's voices, you know, screaming for Treaty, "Treaty, we want Treaty, when do we want it? Now". You know, seeing the kids and I was just thinking like I was just - I was this fire was building up in me and I was just fuelling it. So for 12 months straight I was attending all these yarning circles and events, and it came a time where my mentor and my boss, my mentor at the time gave me an opportunity to organise my own event, back in Shepparton, back in the town where, you know, I lost respect and, you know, I had no trust and so I said, "Great", you know, I embraced it.

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I ended up organising my own event in Shepparton. Stephanie Ross took interest in me. So she more or less took me under her wing. I'm an engagement project officer. I work in the metropolitan region. So my job is to organise events. I do public speaking, and more or less help Mob to get enrolled. All my life people probably didn't expect me to be a winner, you know, they didn't expect me to succeed and it comes across as a shock to them. But they're so proud of me as well.

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5 But it's so empowering to people because that's the beauty of my story, is because when all hope was lost and all trust was gone, I was able to turn that back around. No one is ever too far gone. I strongly believe that no one is ever too far gone. In the education system I would really love to see, you know, more support for the children and more awareness on, you know, the different supports that are needed individually for each child, you know.

10 I think there's more educated teachers in the system and more genuine, more genuine teachers in the system that actually want the best for our people, and just more care and I want to hear more stories of people's experiences, you know, coming through the education system. More truth-telling in the schooling systems. You know, to bring awareness to the system.

15 **<VIDEO CONCLUDED**

<THE HEARING ADJOURNED AT 5.02 PM