LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY INCLUSION

(Reference: Inquiry into access to services and information in Auslan)

Members:

MR M PETTERSSON (Chair)
MR J DAVIS (Deputy Chair)
MS N LAWDER

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 25 OCTOBER 2022

Secretary to the committee:
Dr A Chynoweth (Ph: 620 75498)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents, including requests for clarification of the transcript of evidence, relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the Legislative Assembly website.

WITNESSES

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 11.03 am.

ROSALION, MS KELLYANNE

THE CHAIR: Good morning, everyone, and welcome. I declare open this public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion inquiry into access to services and information in Auslan.

Before we begin, on behalf on the committee, I would like to acknowledge that we meet today on the land of the Ngunnawal people. We respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this city and this region.

The committee has received 32 submissions, which are available on the committee website. Today the committee will hear from 13 witnesses: Ms Kellyanne Rosalion, Mr Jacob Clarke, Ms Laisarn Leong, the Minister for Disability, Ms Amanda Dolejsi, Ms Lou Farrer, Legal Aid ACT, the National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf, Deafblind Australia, the Australian Sign Language Interpreters' Association, Expression Australia, Deaf Connect, and Convo Australia. Interpreters will be present for every single witness.

Please be aware that the proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are being broadcast and webstreamed live.

The committee will now welcome our first witness, Ms Kellyanne Rosalion. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. Can I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the pink privilege statement before you on the table. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

Ms Rosalion: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Do you have an opening statement?

Ms Rosalion: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Take it away.

Ms Rosalion: Thank you. I am Deaf. I live in a bilingual and bi-modal English-Auslan household with my hearing husband, Deaf seven-year-old daughter and three-year-old hearing son. We use Auslan every day at home and when we are out and about, and I am a proud member of the ACT Deaf community.

While English is my first language, due to being raised as an oral Deaf person in country Victoria, Auslan is my daughter's first language, given that it was the only language that was accessible, due to her deafness. My husband and I learnt Auslan while we were at university in Melbourne, so we were in the unique position of being able to provide our daughter with Auslan access from birth. Given the common statistic that around 95 per cent of Deaf children are born to hearing parents, they do not have the same opportunity to access Auslan from birth. Our daughter also accessed a bilingual early intervention service run by the Victorian education department that focused on Auslan and English, while we were living in Melbourne.

In addition to being a Deaf person and a mum raising a Deaf child in the ACT, I am a qualified teacher of the Deaf. I facilitate a fortnightly Auslan playgroup for families. I am employed by a not-for-profit organisation in New South Wales, Parents of Deaf Children, that I approached to branch out into the ACT. I am also a subcommittee member of the DeafACT board, after they approached me to join as a representative for families. I am essentially the main driving force behind any formal supports that commenced in the ACT, because I became tired of hoping that they would exist.

The lack of Auslan in the areas of early intervention and education was a concern when we moved to Canberra—and it still is, to be honest. If we were still living in Melbourne we would have chosen for our daughter to attend a mainstream school with a Deaf facility on site. With this set-up she would be in a mainstream class with other Deaf students, with continual support from a teacher of the Deaf in the classroom and individual specialised support, and also with possible access to Auslan education interpreters and Auslan as a learnt subject.

The services my daughter currently receives consist of a visit from a hearing support teacher, one to two times a week, and a communication support assistant, who is there to provide Auslan support for her a few hours a week. I give estimates on how much support my daughter receives because the communication from the hearing support unit is extremely limited. My daughter is very fortunate to have two other Deaf children in her class, which is rare. In the ACT Deaf children are supported in their local government schools by the Education Directorate's centralised hearing support unit, known in Victoria as the Deaf facility, and by hearing support teachers, known as teachers of the Deaf in Victoria.

I dislike the term "hearing support" that is used in the ACT, because staff are not supporting my child's hearing in the classroom. They are supporting her learning, because she is Deaf and needs additional accommodations because of this. A key point when dealing with parents of Deaf children is to be mindful of the language that is used, as it is so important and has an impact. It has the power to frame a parent's perception of their child's diagnosis of being Deaf and their child's place in the world. It can be the difference between providing a parent with the confidence to work within the limited support that is available in the ACT and the parent who feels that they have no choice but to leave the ACT to get the support they feel their child requires.

It is becoming clear from reading the submissions to the Auslan inquiry, and through my own professional interactions, that parents want change. The option to send a child to a centralised school that focuses on Deaf children and has all the supports and peers, older and younger, in the one location would be ideal. We want a centre that is attached to schools that allows Deaf children to be surrounded by their peers and to have appropriate support, including teachers of the Deaf.

Consolidating the limited expertise that currently exists within the ACT education system would allow students to better access the supports they need and allow communities to thrive. Families are looking for community and connection. We need connection with other parents, for our children to know their Deaf peers, to be able to access Auslan services and to know other Auslan-using families. The current models of early intervention and education in the ACT do not support this.

The ACT excels in so many areas, yet it is clear that we are failing Deaf children and their families. I would love to imagine an ACT that led Australia in this space. But right now I just need an ACT that provides the Auslan access and supports that my daughter and other families with Deaf children need. Every child should have access to language. For Deaf children, sign languages are the only truly accessible choice. The ACT needs to recognise this and provide an education system that provides parents with choice. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will lead off with questions, and then we will make our way through the committee. What effect is the limited support that your daughter is currently being provided having on her education?

Ms Rosalion: I find that she is becoming tired. At the moment she is having issues with one of her processors. She has bilateral cochlear implants and she is only wearing one at the moment, due to soreness. The impact that is having is that she is needing to concentrate a lot more during the day. She takes frequent listening breaks. We have organised it with her teacher that she can sort of withdraw from the group and have a little bit of downtime where no extra brain energy is required.

I will admit that we are very fortunate that, academically, she is doing well. She is in the older cohort in her class. That also has made it a bit easier for her when picking up new things because she has got the basic academic requirements that she needs for her year level and so she is able to expend that energy on actually learning the new skills instead of needing to learn everything.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS LAWDER: Thank you for coming in. You talked about the use of language—for example, “hearing support teachers” as opposed to “teachers of the Deaf”. In your understanding, is that unique to the ACT or is it common across Australia that we have “hearing support” as opposed to “teachers of the Deaf”?

Ms Rosalion: I know that in Victoria, as I said, they have got Deaf facilities. There are Deaf facilities in mainstream schools, with teachers of the Deaf. I am not entirely sure of the terminology in New South Wales. But generally it is fairly widespread that they are teachers of the Deaf. That is the qualification that they do. So I think it is unique in the ACT.

MS LAWDER: You talk about needing connection with other parents, for example, which I think is very, very important. Is it about a lack of critical mass in the ACT? Why is it that we do not appear to provide that more centralised Deaf schooling and communication approach? Do we just not have enough students or is it a deliberate mainstreaming policy?

Ms Rosalion: If we were to get all of the Deaf students into one room, I think we would be quite surprised at how many there are. I know I have been to a few events in the six years that we have been here where there has been a large gathering of Deaf children, and I have said, “Oh my gosh! There are so many. I did not know that many were here.”

I do know that when we were looking to move to Canberra I was investigating what the early intervention options were, what the education options were. I recall seeing on a website from the directorate that there were hearing support units. I would contact them and each of them would say, “We are in the process of closing down.” That suggests to me a big move to more of a mainstreaming policy to allow students to attend in their local area, which in theory is fine, but then you need to be able to support all of those students when they are out in their own local areas.

MS LAWDER: Socially, if there is no other Deaf child in the school, does that limit your child’s engagement with other kids?

Ms Rosalion: It can make it more challenging. I know that, for us, we decided to give our daughter an extra year at Wombats Playschool before starting. We were very lucky that she was a January baby, so we had a bit of flexibility with that, but it was purely on the basis of socialising, so that she could learn more of those social skills to be able to interact with others. Even now, in the yard, I know that she has trouble sometimes interacting with a large range of children. She has her few key friends and generally they can work out how to play nicely and everything else, but, yes, it certainly can be challenging, and for those that are not as confident and out there as my daughter is, yes, it makes it extra hard then.

MS LAWDER: It may be that your daughter is too tired after the daily struggle at school, but do the challenges translate outside of school to other activities? I mean extracurricular activities—ballet or football or whatever else your daughter might be interested in.

Ms Rosalion: I do see challenges. For example, she goes to Ariels on a Monday afternoon. A small group of children are participating in it, but the teachers are not overly sure sometimes about how to catch that she has actually understood. My daughter, in that situation, kind of plays around with the other kids a little bit and tries to watch what is happening, but a lot of the time she misses it, so when it then comes to her turn it is a lot harder for her to know and the teachers have not necessarily noticed that that is why she is missing things.

MR DAVIS: I am interested in the grey area between what seem to be inadequate supports for your daughter at school and then a purpose-built school for Deaf children. Does your daughter’s school—or are you aware of any schools—put in an effort to connect or maybe run some of their programs with other schools so that Deaf children can work together, if not permanently in all of their classroom settings, at least on some projects or some programs?

Ms Rosalion: I am not aware of that at a school level. I know that at the hearing support level in the past, particularly pre-COVID, there were a few full-day excursions, where all the students supported by the hearing support unit were able to come together for a music day. They have got another one coming up shortly. There has been a gathering in the park after school.

The challenge that comes with trying to get those sorts of social things happening is that children are taken out of class time. We all know how full the curriculum is and how much needs to be covered, so it is that balance of: "When is it okay to take them out?" It makes it really hard when it is a choice between their standard, everyday education or removing them for these other benefits, which are great. It makes it really hard, and particularly when they cannot be run regularly.

I have seen, when I have taken my daughter there, that the other students—because they are all kind of out on their own little islands, as I call it—get there, in this big room of all these other people that they do not know, and the only thing that they have in common is that they are Deaf, which is great, but it is like any gathering of people; it takes a bit to get them all together and to feel comfortable. If that is only happening once a term or less, it is really hard to get that sort of socialisation and that comfortableness with others.

MR DAVIS: That makes sense. Does the Education Directorate, to your understanding, or the ACT government more broadly, provide or fund, directly or indirectly, any of the programs that you have spoken about today that allow Deaf children to learn together, socialise together?

Ms Rosalion: The only thing that I can think of is these hearing support days, where they have the excursions where they all come together. It is staffed by the hearing support teachers and the communication support assistance as well. Outside of that, there are no other services or gatherings outside of school time. I understand that that can be difficult, because if it is staffed and facilitated by teachers it needs to be within their normal working hours.

MR DAVIS: That makes sense. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. On behalf of the committee, thank you, Ms Rosalion, for appearing today, as well as for your submission. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you.

Ms Rosalion: Thank you.

CLARKE, MR JACOB, Program Management Analyst, Department of Employment and Workplace Relations

Evidence was given via an Auslan interpreter—

THE CHAIR: We move to the next witness appearing today, Mr Jacob Clarke. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your video submission to the inquiry. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement before you. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Mr Clarke: Yes, I do. I have read and understood.

THE CHAIR: Perfect. Before we proceed to questions, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Mr Clarke: Yes, I would be happy to do that. First of all, I will introduce myself. I am the President of DeafACT and I work for the public service. In summary, my submission is in regard to education. Twenty years ago, maybe more, I moved from a primary school and transitioned to a high school. It is imperative to have interpreters at those significant times, but they were not provided, so we then took the department to court for some legal proceedings, via the Human Rights Commission. We have had other students who have faced similar experiences. You can imagine how significant it is for Deaf students, and the support that is needed in the education space. You need interpreters to be provided on site, on campus. That was essentially, in summary, what my submission was.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. I will lead off with questions and we will make our way through the committee. Your submission, like many others, has suggested that the ACT government create a dedicated school for Deaf students that is staffed by teachers that are qualified interpreters. Can you describe for the committee what that would look like? What are the essential features of a dedicated school for Deaf students?

Mr Clarke: If we were to have a dedicated school for Deaf students, you can imagine the thriving, the education, the access to language—to access their first language through education. If we did have that, we could have a Deaf unit, we could have the interpreters funded, and there would be great social and emotional wellbeing improvements for the Deaf community. I think that is what would come from a dedicated Deaf school or Deaf unit.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. thank you.

MR DAVIS: Thank you, Mr Clarke. You have obviously given this a little bit of thought. Do you have an example for the committee of a school or schools in Australia that you think are operating as best practice that the ACT should emulate?

Mr Clarke: There are a few out there, but whether or not they are best practice

I could not be sure. I know there is one school in Sydney and there is another school in Victoria, which is the Victorian College for the Deaf, VCD. They are dedicated Deaf schools. I am not sure if that is a primary school, but I do know that that is a high school facility. Then we have TPS in Sydney, which is the Thomas Pattison School. They are two schools that I can mention. The level of education and its equivalence to mainstream I could not speak to. I think they are two models that the ACT can look towards. But we certainly need to ensure that the quality of education is equivalent to mainstream school education, and there needs to be equivalence in Auslan.

MR DAVIS: As Mr Pettersson raised with the last person who joined us, there has been the suggestion that maybe the ACT does not have the population to cater for an exclusively Deaf school. I wonder what your thoughts would be on, instead, an exclusively Auslan school, where Auslan is the first language. Students whose parents or family members spoke Auslan but who were themselves not Deaf would be able to enrol and participate.

Mr Clarke: Yes, I think that would be feasible. Just going back to the language: the language is the priority. The number of Deaf children I could not tell you. I know that in Canberra the numbers are small. I could not tell you exactly how many there are, but I think having a school that gave preference to Auslan for young adults, youth and parents would be fantastic.

MR DAVIS: Do you think there would be an appetite amongst the broader community—and I ask this, I suppose, in your role as President of DeafACT—for hearing persons to enrol at an Auslan first language school. If so, do you have some rough estimates for the committee of what that demand might look like?

Mr Clarke: Yes, certainly. I think that would be beneficial and I think that would be looked at fondly in terms of education, access to language and actually having Deaf children being able to have access to the wider community in Auslan.

MR DAVIS: Great. Thank you.

MS LAWDER: Mr Clarke, I recall your human rights complaint. I think it was quite ground-breaking in the ACT at the time and hopefully has led to improvements for other students. It seems to me—but I am interested in your view—that if you only have an interpreter or a hearing support assistant or whatever for a certain number of hours or days of the week, not the entire school week, surely that would compromise the quality of your education? Is that the case?

Mr Clarke: Yes, certainly. I can give you an example of that. I have been in that position myself, having very limited hours of access to language and education and the social aspect of schooling. An example from me: I was in year 6. I had a teacher of the Deaf who was also an interpreter and they would limit the number of hours that they could work with me. I went to a Catholic school.

I would have limited hours from morning until lunchtime, and then from lunchtime through to the afternoon I did not have any access—no interpreter, no teacher of the Deaf. Therefore, my education was limited. My communication with the wider community was limited. When that teacher was gone, I would have a note taker, who would make notes. I would return to class and notes would be there, left for me, on what would be expected for the exercise throughout the afternoon. That was certainly not good enough.

The opinion was that I would be fine and that would be okay for me, but English is not my first language; Auslan is my first language. So you can imagine that that was a struggle. I would then have to rely on my friends or a buddy system to get support and get access. That is just not good enough. They are not qualified interpreters; they should not bear that burden. I had to ask my friends and they would have to somehow communicate with me about what was going on with the paper or what was going on in the classroom. I could not understand what the teacher was saying. I do not think that is appropriate and I do not want that to happen for anybody in any education system. You need to have interpreters and a teacher of the Deaf in the classroom full time. It should not be a few hours; it should not be done part time. That is just not good enough. Deaf children need access to that social aspect and education.

MS LAWDER: In the ACT we sometimes hear that there is a problem perhaps with the pipeline of interpreters. How do you feel about the number of interpreters that we have available in the ACT and how are we going to ensure a supply into the future?

Mr Clarke: Just clarifying that that is for Canberra? Yes, that is an ongoing problem. We have a limited number of interpreters here—I think seven or eight interpreters—but the Deaf community here is large enough and growing, so the supply and demand is an issue. There are not enough courses for people to learn Auslan here in the ACT. The Auslan courses are managed by Deaf Connect, which is based in Sydney. We have a lot of interest, a lot of people wanting to learn the language, and that is the pathway. Learning the language is a pathway to becoming an interpreter. Without that pathway, we do not have more interpreters coming through that pipeline.

It seems to be an ongoing funding issue, from my understanding. I have got a friend, to give you an example, who wants to become a qualified interpreter but the courses are not available. It is said that there is no funding or there are not enough people. What happened was that that person needed to go to Sydney every week to engage in that course. That is an unrealistic expectation. It is unfair that those in Canberra or the ACT have to travel to Sydney. We should be providing courses locally. So, yes, it is an ongoing concern, whether it be funding or whether it be Deaf Connect as an organisation. The courses are not cheap. A lot of people cannot afford those courses. You are right: it is expensive, Nicole.

MS LAWDER: For the benefit of non-Deaf people who may be watching and listening, on our news and in our parliament now we have captions available. Can you explain how you might benefit from an Auslan interpreter versus using captions?

Mr Clarke: Yes; sure. Captions are there as an accessible tool, but not everybody can read captions or has English as their first language. As I mentioned previously, my first language is Auslan. Auslan provides a lot more intonation through expression and different features of the language, while captioning is just words on a screen. From my understanding, a lot of Deaf people are not fond of captioning at all. So, yes, it is there as a tool, but it is not accessible to the wider Deaf community.

To have an Auslan interpreter would be the preference. A lot of people out there think, "Yes, we will provide captioning and that is enough," but it is not. It will never be the best option. The Auslan interpreter being there is the best option for us, and that would be the preference of the Deaf community, especially when it comes to emergency services and broadcasting—really, anything that is broadcast on TV, on the news. Yes, a lot of the Deaf community would rely on the Auslan interpreter, as opposed to the captions.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. You are President of DeafACT. What support does DeafACT need from the ACT government?

Mr Clarke: DeafACT is a not-for-profit organisation. We are not a service provider; we are a support to the community—advocacy, recreation, sports. For me, as the president, I focus on the advocacy, and that is what has led to this inquiry, but what I would like to see is DeafACT being the leading organisation directly engaging with the ACT government over all things deafness.

THE CHAIR: Do you need any further assistance from government in making that happen?

Mr Clarke: Yes, indeed. Yes. We would certainly like to establish that long-term relationship so that we can get supports and work together with the ACT government.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: At the risk of really challenging you, Mr Clarke, I would be interested in some specifics on that—as to what sort of tangible assistance. Is it funding for positions; is it promoting your organisation and connecting others in the Deaf community to your organisation? What are some of the really tangible ways—noting that a result of this committee inquiry will hopefully be us making recommendations?

Mr Clarke: There are a whole range of options. I think what we essentially want is for the ACT government to have an understanding of the needs of the Deaf community: providing interpreters and adjusting policy, especially when it comes to emergency services. Hospitals are an example. When you attend an emergency department you are always having a miscommunication about what is happening, what needs to happen, and what support you need in the health space. Also, emergency services need to understand the different communication modes for the Deaf community. That is what I would like to see happen, and I think that can happen through relationships and partnerships.

MR DAVIS: I wonder, Mr Clarke, would DeafACT have the capacity currently if an ACT government directorate came to you and said, "We would like to employ you to do a project in our directorate that identifies our gaps, weaknesses and opportunities when working with or providing services to Deaf people"?

Mr Clarke: Yes, certainly. That would be something that we would be willing to undertake. I think we could establish an Auslan policy or we could review policy and support, show where the gaps are and make some recommendations for actions and rectifications that can happen. Yes, certainly. That would be a good idea.

MR DAVIS: Noting that Deaf people are not a monolith and you want to be able to have access to all government services, were we to prioritise and pick a part of government where your experience would be most utilised and most needed in the short term, where would you want to do that gap analysis first?

Mr Clarke: Wow! There is a lot to consider there. Aged care, emergency services and interpreter provisions—they would be the top priorities. That is where we see the largest gaps, and I think the policy amendments could support that space. I can give you an example: the emergency department at a hospital. The Deaf person attends. Again, ongoing issues can be rectified with ongoing training. If staff see a Deaf person present at an emergency department, there is no rigmarole; there is no back and forth. They organise an interpreter straight away. It is clear and smooth. I think that just there was an example for you.

Aged care is another significant concern. We have an ageing population, but how can we, within the aged-care sector, provide the training, the Auslan training and recognition of the different modes of communication for Deaf people? Even the education space is an issue. Mental health is another one—mental health services for the Deaf community. We could have a counsellor here who could converse in Auslan. Yes, there are a lot. There are a lot of things that we need to consider. What I have mentioned are the priorities. It is not going to be a quick fix, but we do need to improve this space.

MR DAVIS: I appreciate that that was a tricky question, but I have been here long enough to know that things move slowly and I tend to get more if I prioritise my questions. That is why I asked you, Mr Clarke. Thank you.

Mr Clarke: No worries.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. On behalf of the committee, Mr Clarke, thank you for appearing today. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription.

Mr Clarke: Thank you for having me.

LEONG, MS LAISARN, Teacher of the Deaf, ACT Education Directorate

Evidence was given via an Auslan interpreter—

THE CHAIR: We move to our next witness today, Ms Leong. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your video submission to the inquiry. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement?

Ms Leong: Yes, I confirm.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Ms Leong: Yes. Hello, everyone. Thank you for having me here today. I do have many different hats, but I am here today in one capacity as a Deaf person, in another as a teacher of the Deaf, and as a carer as well. I do wear many different hats. My deafness has impacted me in all facets of my life. I have worked as a teacher of the Deaf for over 20 years. I have worked in Deaf schools, Deaf units and mainstream schools. I am a carer for my ageing father and, as a Deaf person, I have experienced a multitude of barriers within the community.

I have taught many Deaf children over the years and I find that at some of the Deaf schools, within those Deaf schools, Deaf children are happier. They are more confident, they have a well-established identity and sense of self and they know who they are. I have taught varying ages throughout the years, and when there are kids that are mainstreamed there is often a feeling of isolation, of limited confidence. I have taught, as I said, in different areas and different age brackets. If there is a Deaf unit within a school, often what I have seen is a more established sense of confidence and identity because they are around peers.

As a teacher of the Deaf, obviously it is imperative that you are a fluent signer, which I am, as a teacher of the Deaf and as a Deaf person. Within the community, I have faced many barriers. I used to live in Sydney. I have moved to Canberra and I am residing here now and I was so shocked that even the movies are inaccessible. They provide certain sessions that are captioned, but it is very limited—say, only on a Wednesday morning, which often limits a person's ability for self-determination and choice. In Sydney you can go to any movie at any time, at any theatre and in any of the sessions, because they provide captioning for all sessions.

I am a carer and my father has been admitted into hospital several times. Within the hospital system now the staff members, doctors and nurses, are wearing masks. It really hinders the communication, because as a Deaf person I need visual cues. I need to be able to see their lips moving and you cannot see that if someone is wearing a mask. The policy has been cited many times and the policy states that if you are to encounter a Deaf person, as someone working in the hospital system, you can remove your mask, but staff members are failing to do so. They are just a few things, a few of the barriers that I have encountered. A lot of this has already been covered in my video submission, which you will have seen.

I was diagnosed with a deafness at three and went to boarding school as a youngster, when I was three. I spent 18 months at boarding school. My parents removed me from that situation because it was not suitable to me. There was a unit, an OD unit, established at the time, where there were four Deaf students, so I was sent into that unit. I was taught to speak and listen and then, further on, throughout my education experience I was mainstreamed and I was on my own in that school setting without any support.

In that setting I did okay. I did not meet another Deaf person until my late 20s, which is when I learned Auslan and I learned to sign. That was the first time in my life where I had full access and I understood everything—in my late 20s. That was a life-changing moment for me because I finally had access to everything. With the oral method of communication, there were so many inconsistencies for me and I was missing a lot. It was draining; it was exhausting. So, yes, it is really difficult for a Deaf person to have to manage that every day.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will lead off with questions and we will make our way through the other committee members. In your submission you outline a number of instances where you attended a health facility and you were not provided with appropriate support. It is a very personal question, but how did that make you feel, in that moment when those support services were not provided to you?

Ms Leong: It was awful, to be honest. I wanted—no, I needed—to know what was happening with my father and his health requirements. I needed the doctor to explain in full, but they flat out refused to remove their mask, which meant I did not have access. Some of them would write things down, reluctantly. They would write things down for me, but I was only getting very limited bits of information. It was not full access, so it was frustrating. It was difficult and it was upsetting. I felt demoralised and disrespected, in a way.

THE CHAIR: What sorts of services do you think should be in place in these health settings?

Ms Leong: Interpreting support; interpreters provided on demand.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you.

MS LAWDER: You talk about being a carer for your father and the difficulties in the hospital situation. Is there still the national Auslan booking system for medical services? If you are not the patient, if you are the carer, are you able to access NABS for your father's care, or are there other barriers here—for example, a lack of interpreters?

Ms Leong: I am using my own NDIS funding in situations like that. If I need to book an interpreter then it does not come out of NABS. It comes out of my NDIS plan, if the hospital will not provide one. Often there have been reasons like: "It is lockdown," or "There are not enough interpreters," or you are only allowed one person in the room; therefore an interpreter cannot be present in the room at that instance because of the pandemic or because they cannot find an interpreter or locate an interpreter. So there are a number of reasons as to why it is happening, why interpreters are not being provided, but I should not have to pay for that. It should not come out of my personal package. My father does not have funding for interpreting supports. He does not have funding for interpreters. I do, but that is for my personal needs and my requirements.

Also, sometimes if you are with a loved one and you are at the hospital you can be there all day and you do not know exactly when the doctor is going to come up, which makes it difficult to book an interpreter.

MS LAWDER: Mr Clarke spoke a little about aged care. Possibly with respect to your father, but I guess more generally in the Deaf community, is it a concern for you that when Deaf people might wish to go to retirement or nursing homes, aged-care homes, they would be quite isolated, for example?

Ms Leong: It is a concern. I would love to see a Deaf nursing home, with other Deaf individuals, where the staff members were fluent signers. That would be lovely. That would be ideal. I think that would be the end goal. That would be wonderful. Personally, I have not even thought that far ahead at this stage. I am so focused on my father at the moment. But, yes, in terms of my life I would like to see an aged-care facility that does cater to the Deaf community—a centralised system where any Deaf individual can go and reside and be with their peers and be able to communicate in their first language.

MS LAWDER: Are you aware of any examples of that: aged care specifically for the Deaf community?

Ms Leong: There used to be one in Stanmore—I am talking many, many years ago; maybe in the 70s, I would say—but that was closed down.

MR DAVIS: Ms Leong, I am interested in asking you some questions as a teacher of the Deaf. I asked Mr Clarke if he thought there would be sufficient appetite or population for an Auslan first school. We have a national teacher shortage, so I wonder if you think we would have enough teachers of the Deaf to start such a school.

Ms Leong: There could be teachers of the Deaf, yes, but they would not be fluent in Auslan, those teachers of the Deaf, or they have might very minimal signing skills. There is a wide range of fluency in Auslan. Some teachers of the Deaf can sign but not proficiently enough. In terms of teachers of the Deaf Australia-wide that are fluent in Auslan, I would say that it is only two per cent of the teachers of the Deaf that can fluently sign. If I talk about Deaf teachers of the Deaf, that figure is even less.

MR DAVIS: You will have to forgive my ignorance, Ms Leong. Teachers of the Deaf—are you classroom teachers with a Bachelor of Education? How does your role work in a classroom?

Ms Leong: A teacher of the Deaf does have their masters. They have completed their masters, yes. There is your normal teacher, who has a Bachelor of Education, and then there is an additional qualification should you wish to become a teacher of the Deaf.

MR DAVIS: I see. Obviously, teachers have to go through a series of professional development trainings over the course of the year. Are you aware of the Education Directorate providing Auslan as a professional development option for classroom teachers? Do you think Canberra's classroom teachers would benefit from having that made available to them?

Ms Leong: Do you mean for teachers of the Deaf or teachers in general, sorry?

MR DAVIS: Teachers in general. I suppose I am imagining a future where we have this Auslan first school and I am, in my mind, trying to figure out how to staff it. I am thinking about how we would get to that point. I am wondering if there are classroom teachers who may want to learn Auslan. Firstly, do you think there would be classroom teachers currently who do not know Auslan who would like to learn Auslan? Secondly, do you think the Education Directorate could or should provide those supports?

Ms Leong: That is a very difficult question to answer because there are a lot of Deaf children but not all of them sign, so they all have varying communication methods. Some do sign, but not all of them. There are a lot of Deaf children that are auditory verbal, so they speak and listen. The classroom teacher would need to be able to cater to all communication styles and methods for all children. There are children with additional disabilities as well. They may be on the autism spectrum, which means the teacher needs to cater not only to their language needs but their disability as well. It is very difficult to bring teachers into a situation like that.

But the most important thing for any kid is communication and access to friends and friendship circles. If the children were to learn some Auslan as well, then our Deaf kids could not only communicate with their teachers but communicate with their peers as well. It is not just about catering to the teachers and their desire to learn Auslan. It is about the kids as well, the other kids within that classroom. If everyone within the classroom could sign then there would be fewer feelings of isolation that Deaf children face.

If they are raised in isolation it can lead to future mental health issues, which can have an impact for them as Deaf adults. Your upbringing is really important, the way that you are raised. If you are raised in an environment with no peers, no friends, no access to information, it can have a detrimental effect on your adulthood. I think this is an area that needs further investigation as well and further research, because there are many students that I see that are not young but they arrive into the school setting without any language at all. They have missed out on so much. They can barely read and write. Without any foundation language, it is difficult to form.

MR DAVIS: Thank you. That is very clear. Thanks so much.

MS LAWDER: In the ACT, as I am sure you are aware, in our education system we have learning support assistants, LSAs. Do any of our LSAs help with Deaf students and, if so, do they have Auslan training themselves?

Ms Leong: In our team we have five what we call communication support assistants, because they do different work to an LSA, just to differentiate there. We have a team of CSAs, as we call them. All of our CSA's are fluent Auslan users. Four of them are in fact qualified interpreters and one is training to do her interpreter training. So we are very fortunate to have that team of five working with us. Those five support Auslan-using Deaf students and oral students as well.

MS LAWDER: You mentioned interacting with peers and perhaps isolation for young Deaf people, students. What about parents of a Deaf child? Where or how do they learn Auslan, if they choose to go down the Auslan path with their child?

Ms Leong: There are many parents that actually do not want to learn to sign because they are not aware of deafness. They have had no experience of or exposure to deafness. If they did want to learn Auslan then there are very limited choices. There are not, in fact, many options. We do not have enough Deaf teachers within the ACT. There is a training course available, an Auslan training course, but it does not suit the parents' busy lifestyle or they are unable to incorporate that into their current arrangements. So there are a lot of barriers, actually, in terms of accessing Auslan.

I am on the board of DeafACT. I would love to see a Deaf hub established, a hub where it is a one stop-shop for all services, all needs, for members of the Deaf community—access to Auslan, a Deaf club for socialisation, a playgroup for Deaf children and parents, speech therapy—just a centre where all services that are deafness-related can be accessed.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. One last quick question before we wrap up. You spoke about the isolation that Deaf kids might experience. Does that isolation occur for older Deaf Canberrans as well?

Ms Leong: Absolutely, yes. The reason is that most Deaf adults leave school with the equivalent of year 3 level literacy, which means they do not have access to written communication, which means they are unable to access captions, should they be on the TV. They have limited access to information. So they are constantly facing these barriers out in the community. That leads to feelings of isolation, absolutely, because English is not their first language and English is hard. So there is that, or they are encountering members of the community that do not sign, and they need to be around other signing individuals for socialisation. It is very complex. It is a very complex situation that Deaf Canberrans find themselves in.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Unfortunately, we are out of time. One behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you, Ms Leong, for appearing today. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you very much for being here today.

Ms Leong: Thank you.

Hearing suspended from 12.01 to 12.40 pm.

DAVIDSON, MS EMMA, Assistant Minister for Families and Community Services, Minister for Disability, Minister for Justice Health, Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Veterans and Seniors

DUNNE, MS ELLEN, Executive Branch Manager, Communities, Community Services Directorate

THE CHAIR: Welcome back, everybody, to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion inquiry into access to services and information in Auslan. Please be aware that the proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

Our next witnesses today are Ms Emma Davidson, the Minister for Disability, and Ms Ellen Dunne from the Community Services Directorate. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your submission to the inquiry. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement before you. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications?

Ms Davidson: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Ms Davidson: I am happy to go straight to questions.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. I will lead off with a question and we will make our way through the committee. The committee has heard evidence from a range of witnesses, and from submissions, about the very different experiences they have had in accessing ACT services. Why do you think there are such varied experiences in regard to ACT services and their provision to Deaf people in Canberra?

Ms Davidson: When we are talking about the way in which someone communicates, there is going to be a lot of variation in what individuals need and what works best for them, so we are going to need a diversity of responses available for people. For some people, having an Auslan interpreter is going to be very important and there may not be any other easy way for them to communicate without that. For other people, there may be other ways they prefer to communicate. I would not be surprised if different people have different experiences of ACT services meeting their needs, depending on what their needs are. What is really important for us is to be able to have an understanding of individual needs and to find the best ways we can to support those individual needs, for each individual person, rather than trying to have one response that is going to fit for everyone.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: Minister, you say in your report that the Deaf community has engaged positively with the consultation on the disability strategy, with approximately 10 per cent of Deaf community members, to date, being involved. Has that figure changed since your submission was prepared? More broadly, what is the government's strategy to try and get that number as close to 100 per cent as possible?

Ms Davidson: Thank you for the question. The ACT disability strategy preparation has completed the consultation phase and will be producing a listening report in December. I could not tell you off the top of my head the exact number of people from the Deaf community who participated, but I expect that it is similar to what was in the submission.

We had a really good, strong response from the community wanting to participate and from the disability community, more broadly, in the ACT. The level of participation that we saw in this consultation was really very high compared to a lot of consultation processes that government goes through. I think the reason it was so high is that the process was co-designed with people with disability, and people with disability led every conversation, whether that was a large public forum or kitchen table conversations or people providing their own submissions, which they could do in written format or in audio or video.

This was an example of trying to provide opportunities for people to participate in the way that suits their individual communication needs. Having Auslan interpreters and captioning and various things to support people from the Deaf community at different forums, I think, was also very helpful.

MR DAVIS: Awesome. Given that I do not want to pre-empt the listening report that is coming out in December—although if you want to give the committee a scoop nobody will be mad at you—is there anything that has come out from what you understand so far that needs immediate addressing? Are there any immediate remedies that could not wait for the completion of the report, particularly as it pertains to the Deaf community?

Ms Davidson: I expect that we are going to hear from people that they are looking for more support to communicate, not just with ACT government but throughout the ACT community, in ways that are understanding of their individual needs. It is about not just the Deaf community but lots of other people who have different communication needs, based on the way their bodies work.

What this really goes to, I think, is how we view disability in the community and how we view diversity of communication needs—whether we understand that bodies and minds work differently and that we need to take a more individual approach to how we communicate with each other, and a more understanding approach, or whether we are saying that there is a default method of communication and we want everyone to fit into that.

I think what we are moving towards, as a society, is having more understanding of diversity and looking for ways to improve all of our understanding and support for that across the whole community. That includes schools, shops, various services people might need to interact with, but also as individuals in social settings as well. It is really important. We have really seen over the last couple of years that social connection is vitally important for people's wellbeing, and communication is how we connect with each other. So we need to find ways, as a community, to enable that.

MR DAVIS: Thank you.

MS LAWDER: Just following up on what Mr Davis said, you said in the submission that approximately 10 per cent of Deaf community members, to date, were involved. Are you able to take on notice and advise the committee exactly how many responses there were from the Deaf community?

Ms Davidson: Yes, I can do that.

MS LAWDER: Thanks. And could you expand a little for me on how this consultation process took place and how Deaf people were involved?

Ms Davidson: Yes; absolutely. I might pass to Ms Dunne to talk through the detail. I personally attended a number of the consultation sessions myself. I did not want to influence the discussions, so I did not stay for the entire session. I would come at the start and participate and make sure that everyone felt comfortable and welcome to have really honest conversations with us about things that can be hard to hear.

When you are trying to support good access to services it can be really hard to find that some people have found it challenging. But it is really important for us to know that and to be able to talk through what people's needs are so that we can do better. I am really very appreciative of everyone who participated in those consultations to help us do that. Ms Dunne can talk about how the consultations were run.

Ms Dunne: Thank you. Before the consultations occurred, it was very important for us to co-design the elements of the consultations. That was done with people from the disability community, and there was an opportunity for us to shape the questions that allowed people to speak quite openly and freely about their own experiences and provide us with what they thought would be good ideas for change. There were a number of methodologies that we used. People were invited to participate. Each of the sessions was run by people with disabilities. So it was really community-led, it was co-designed by the community, it was led by the community, and it was facilitated by the community. The officials that attended were there for assistance and record keeping. I could take on notice a question—

MS LAWDER: I am interested in the specific Deaf side of it, rather than disability generally.

Ms Dunne: We would have worked with stakeholders to see if we could invite people to come along who were either deaf or hard of hearing. That 10 per cent would probably have been 10 per cent of the 300 that we thought were deaf of hard of hearing within the community and who used Auslan at home. We will check those figures for you.

MS LAWDER: Thanks. Since you have just mentioned it, could you identify: were they Deaf, as in Auslan-using, or hard of hearing? What numbers were in each?

Ms Dunne: We will certainly see if we can break it down for you, yes.

MS LAWDER: Thanks. In your submission, Minister, you talk about the identified shortage of certified level III Auslan interpreters within the ACT, including the lack of incentives, high financial costs, location, geographical barriers et cetera. We heard from an earlier witness that there is a course run in the ACT by, I think, Deaf Connect, but it is quite expensive for people to undertake.

My recollection, vaguely, is that there used to be an Auslan certificate IV course at CIT, which was stopped for some reason, which was short-sighted because it was just before the introduction of the NDIS, which would have potentially enabled more Deaf people to access interpreters. I know you are not the CIT minister, but in terms of people with disability, specifically Deaf people, has there been any thinking about reinstating that Auslan course at CIT?

Ms Davidson: I could not tell you about what courses have been considered for CIT, but the process of becoming qualified at that level for Auslan interpreting is going to take more than just completing the course. The person needs to have a certain number of years of experience as well.

It is also worth considering the diverse situations in which people need interpreters in the ACT. If you have an interpreter who has spent a lot of time interpreting in access to general government services and then suddenly has to provide interpreting services for, say, a complex medical situation or a complex legal appointment, there might be a whole lot of terminology that they have not come across much before.

This is why, in an area where you have more interpreters who are working across a greater diversity of areas, you have got more chance of finding an interpreter who has the experience for that particular type of appointment. The same happens with interpreting in other languages as well.

MS LAWDER: I am just thinking in terms of creating a pathway, if you live in the ACT—a taster, if you like, at an accessible and affordable price. You are probably interested in doing Auslan because you already have some connection with the Deaf community. You may have a friend or a family member, for example, who is Deaf. It is about having a course available here, without having to leave the ACT. Then, if you are interested or have the aptitude or whatever, you have to go to Sydney or Melbourne to actually become an interpreter. I guess it is that entry level that I am interested in and that seems to me to be a little bit of a barrier.

Ms Davidson: Yes. I honestly could not answer for you what is being considered at CIT in terms of their programs.

MR DAVIS: More broadly, we all accept that there are not enough interpreters to meet the demand. There are not enough people that speak Auslan to meet the demand. What role do you think the ACT government has to either (a) provide training in Auslan or (b) provide supports for Canberrans who need to access training for Auslan in other places?

Ms Davidson: There are a number of areas where we have shortages of people who can provide the right supports in our community. It is not just about Auslan interpreters. One of the common factors in some of these areas of shortage is that it is something that requires skills that take some years to develop, and there are a relatively small number of people in the community who need that support. Trying to make that a viable form of work for the people who want to do that is a challenge and requires some innovative thinking. I think there are things that we may be able to learn where we are seeing some success in dealing with those shortages that could be applied.

One of the things that is really interesting, though, is to see the way that technology is changing how people deal with some of these situations. We have seen it with access to remote working and telehealth and things like that. Video interpreting is another one of those areas. It will not be suitable for all situations. But I think what we need to look at is flexibility around how we solve the problem and trying to best meet the needs for that individual situation and not trying to find one solution that is going to work for everyone in every situation.

MR DAVIS: I guess so, but we have heard a lot from people who have joined us this morning about how important it is to have real people to provide interpreting services and to be able to have real conversations with real people in Auslan. So while a lot of those things, I imagine, would accommodate a number of people, we simply do not have enough people to interpret, in person, in Canberra, to meet demand.

I wonder: is there anything specific you can point to where the government is helping to support people who put their hand up and say, “I would like to learn Auslan for the purposes of being an interpreter”? If there are not those examples, have you or the directorate thought about what future programs or interventions the government might take to support that individual when they say, “I want to learn Auslan and I could make a career out of this”?

Ms Davidson: One of the things that we can do is support the community in developing communication skills from an earlier age. For families where there is a Deaf member of the family, the ability for people to learn Auslan is helpful, and knowing that you have got people who have been using Auslan in social conversations for a long period of time is really important in building up those skills. Seeing greater support and looking at what we can do to develop those pathways is helpful.

It is also important to think about the way that the NDIS impacts on the market. If we end up in a situation where everything is dependent on NDIS plans then that kind of drives the entire market towards providing solutions in a very specific way that does not necessarily encompass all of the ways in which people might want to access support—or might want to access support at an earlier stage, before someone has an NDIS plan in place or even realises they might need one.

To give an example from my own house, I have a child who could not hear until he was about 3½. I did not actually know until he was over three that he could not hear, because he had learned to lip-read the way other people learn to hear language. So, as long as I was facing him, if I gave him instructions that were complex, step by step things it was fine and I did not realise there was a problem. If he was not facing me, he could not hear me; he could not read my lips and so he did not know. I would have no awareness that he did not know what I wanted.

For a child at that age, solving that problem, it took us about 18 months of therapy before we even realised what was going on. In a situation like that, having access to early supports and having flexibility around how we are going to meet this person's communication needs is really important. If we rely on the NDIS to do everything, we are probably going to miss some people who really need help sooner.

MR DAVIS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. And with that, we are out of time. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you, Minister Davidson and Ms Dunne, for appearing today. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you.

Ms Davidson: Thank you.

DOLEJSI, MS AMANDA BETH, Auslan interpreter

THE CHAIR: We move to the next witness appearing today, Ms Dolejsi. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the privilege statement?

Ms Dolejsi: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Ms Dolejsi: Just a brief one.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Ms Dolejsi: I am not known for being brief. Today I am here with two of my hats on: that of wife to my husband, Ivan, who is profoundly Deaf, and also as someone who has worked in the education system for many years. They are the two areas that I am basically looking at. If there are any questions you have around interpreting, my colleague Sheree Murray will be here later on and she will be happy to answer those questions, although you might be able to twist my arm a little bit.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. I want to go to a certain part of your submission that talks about emergencies. What happens in the ACT right now when Deaf people experience an emergency or crisis—firstly, when they are trying to contact people, and then, maybe secondary to that, when they turn up at hospital?

Ms Dolejsi: Generally there are phone calls to interpreters that they happen to know and have the phone number of to say, “We are in a situation. We are on our way to emergency. Can you meet us there?” They text message us or they FaceTime us or whatever. That indicates that they do not have confidence in arriving at the hospital and being able to secure the services of an Auslan interpreter. So, generally speaking, they contact someone that they know is an interpreter and arrange to meet them there. For many of them, they will use their NDIS funding. They may, after they have contacted us and found that we are available, ring the 24-hour interpreting service themselves and book an interpreter, using their NDIS funding. That is not what their NDIS funding is for. We all know that. But that is the only way they feel safe that they are going to be able to access information once they get to ED.

THE CHAIR: So what systems should be in place?

Ms Dolejsi: Deaf people should arrive there and ask for an Auslan interpreter and be provided with one. All of the contact information—and there is really only one number; it is not hard—should be available to the staff. They should know how to access that information and be able to provide it and not have to question which account code it is or who is responsible for payment. Everything should be there to allay any fears that they might have that will delay Deaf people getting access to that service.

Even when you are sitting in an emergency room and you actually have not been triaged yet, the angst and the anxiety that people experience, in addition to whatever the situation is that is happening to them, is multiplied many-fold because they just do not know what is going to happen. All of that can be reduced if there is a system in place that is easily accessed. I am sure there is an intranet available to the admin staff at emergency that they can easily access. So I think that is really easily fixed.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MS LAWDER: So is there no longer NABS available?

Ms Dolejsi: NABS's role has changed quite significantly over the years, with the introduction of the NDIS. Also, fairly recently, Deaf Connect—it was actually Deaf Services Queensland but now it is Deaf Connect—was given funding by the federal health department—

MS LAWDER: Sorry, I should stop you and backtrack. Could you very briefly explain what NABS is?

Ms Dolejsi: The National Auslan Interpreter Booking Service. Basically, it is medically focused. It is funded by a commonwealth department. I think it may be DSS. I am not 100 per cent sure currently who funds it, but it is basically to provide access to medical interpreting for Deaf people. In the changes that have happened since the NDIS its role has changed quite a bit and it is really only providing interpreting services to Australians over 65 who are not eligible for NDIS funding.

Things changed again fairly recently, in that Deaf Connect has now been given funding by the federal health department, I think, to provide Auslan interpreting services to those Deaf people who are over 65. So Deaf people over 65 now can access interpreting services for going to their lawyer, booking a holiday or going down to the local social club.

I know that the Deaf seniors in Canberra, through DeafACT, use the over-65 funding for our outings. So if we go up the highway to watch *Mary Poppins*, to see a theatre performance, or we go to Yass, we will book an interpreter to come with us and we use that funding. So it has provided a little bit more access to over 65s than was previously available.

MS LAWDER: So if you were under 65 you would use your NDIS package for medical purposes?

Ms Dolejsi: Only if it is private. If it is public, the hospital should be paying.

MS LAWDER: Right.

Ms Dolejsi: If it is public mental health, if it is a public hospital, anything to do with ACT government clinics—the walk-in nurse service or any of those services—they should be covered.

MS LAWDER: And the GP, if you have a GP?

Ms Dolejsi: GPs tend to use the NDIS funding, yes.

MS LAWDER: Okay.

Ms Dolejsi: But they can use NABS as well.

MS LAWDER: On mental health, if you arrived at the emergency department in a mental health crisis, what would the response be like, do you think?

Ms Dolejsi: Past experience has been that you basically get sent home.

MS LAWDER: If you are suicidal or—

Ms Dolejsi: The staff there have no way of finding out, if they do not employ an interpreter. If they do not contact an interpreter, there is no way they are going to find out if that person is suicidal. There have been cases from the Deaf community, anecdotal evidence that they have given to DeafACT, where they have been suicidal and they have been sent home. There seems to be this real block about getting interpreters. It is not just to access the emergency department itself; it is to access the crisis mental health team. Even if you are at home and you want to access the crisis mental health team, you cannot. They do not advertise an SMS number. So you have to get someone to ring for you in order to access the crisis team.

MS LAWDER: So you have to say, "Excuse me"—

Ms Dolejsi: Yes: "I am in the middle of a crisis, but can you please contact the crisis team for me?" So you actually have to have the wherewithal to be able to do that.

MS LAWDER: Okay. In the longer term or on an ongoing basis, for a mental health issue, do you know what the services are like in the ACT?

Ms Dolejsi: Deaf people access generic services, mainly because there are no specialised services here. In actual fact, that means that a Deaf person is going to a practitioner and it will take the practitioner at least two or three, sometimes more, sessions before they work out, "Hang on a minute. This person thinks a bit differently to everyone else. What are the issues that are different?" because they do not necessarily have all the training that they need in order to deal with someone who is profoundly Deaf. It is a known fact that it is quite different. For Deaf people, their mental illnesses manifest in sometimes quite different ways to the way hearing people's mental illnesses manifest.

For example, the first question that most mental health specialists will ask you, or will ask a client is: "Do you hear voices?" That sort of question is generally followed by silence and then: "What do you mean, do I hear voices? I am Deaf." How do you ask those questions in a more appropriate, Deaf-sensitive way? Most of the practitioners out there do not know any of this. They are using diagnostic tools that have not been designed to allow for Deaf people's different ways and visual ways of thinking. Often there is a lot of misdiagnosis.

MS LAWDER: Just briefly, if we can, I want to go to emergency broadcasting, for example. It seems like we have improved a bit over the past few years in providing interpreting, live interpreting, for announcements. From your experience in the Deaf community, with your husband and others, how are we doing? Are we doing well or can we still improve?

Ms Dolejsi: From a community perspective, I think it is getting better. Definitely, during the COVID pandemic, the government was very well aware and provided interpreters. It was really nice to see that, if they could not provide an interpreter, people asked where we were. I think that is indicative of the fact that the general community was aware, and we were obvious when we were not present.

But I think there are still a lot of information matters on all of the relevant websites that need to be in Auslan. The health department, for example, ACT Health, has a lot of other language information but not all of it is available in Auslan. With most of the government service-providing departments there is not a lot of information available in Auslan on those sites. So, yes, tick, but still a little bit to go in other areas.

MR DAVIS: I am interested in moving to the part of your submission about education and training, similar to the conversation I was having with Mr Clarke about an Auslan school or a school for Deaf and hard of hearing children. This committee recently completed an inquiry on school infrastructure and maintenance, where we heard a lot of evidence about what advocates described as segregated schools that were exclusively for young people with a disability. Your submission seems to advocate for exactly that, for Deaf and hard of hearing students. Would you mind talking the committee through why that is?

Ms Dolejsi: Segregation does not work for Deaf children, Deaf adults. They need other people to communicate with who communicate in their own language. I know there has been quite a push from other disability advocacy organisations to mainstream people with a disability. It just does not work with our Deaf kids. Our Deaf kids need other Deaf kids. They need access to language for their own mental health, for their own education. Without that peer group support, that language, that communication support, our Deaf kids have a high rate of mental illness. They are undereducated and they are just not achieving.

When you work in an education setting your aim is to help this child achieve their full potential, and our Deaf kids are not achieving their full potential by any stretch of the imagination. Not many of them are going to university. Not many of them are even completing secondary education at the same level as their peers. The education they are receiving is less. A lot of effort is put in to them learning to speak and to hear, to the detriment of their education. They need to be learning life skills, learning about the world they live in, learning how to prepare themselves, both physically and mentally, for life outside of the education system, life away from their protective families. It is the opposite.

MR DAVIS: Could I ask, then, again similar to the conversation I had with Mr Clarke: would you have a view that the government should establish a school for Deaf and hard of hearing young people or, to pivot the emphasis, a school in which

Auslan is the first language? Would you see a difference between those two and would you have a preference between those two?

Ms Dolejsi: I do not see a difference between those two. Whatever the school is, it has to have a first language of Auslan at school. It has to have LOTE, Auslan as its LOTE, Auslan as the language used in not only the classroom but the staffroom and the playground. It has to be the language of that school.

It can be attached to another school. I am not saying it has to be a standalone entity, but what I see as the most appropriate way is to go from cradle to the end of year 12, so as soon as those children are diagnosed those parents know where to go. They do not spend the first two or three years of their child's life trying to find Deaf people and happening to run into them at a GymbaROO class. One of the people who I think provided a submission I read just happened to run in to a Deaf person at a GymbaROO class. That is not where you should be finding your village. Your children should be finding their village, and the whole family—not just the child but the whole family—should have access to the services they need through this one hub.

MR DAVIS: Critics might say, "The ACT doesn't have a large enough population of Deaf and hard of hearing young people to sustain a school for Deaf and hard of hearing young people." As someone who is a hearing person, Mandy—and, with respect to other interpreters here, the face of interpreting in Canberra; I think a lot of people recognise you—have you had conversations with people who would have an appetite to send their young person to a school in which Auslan was their first language?

Ms Dolejsi: Yes. And I think basically my response to that is: we cannot afford not to. We really cannot. There has been some recent research—and I am really sad that I have not got it with me—from Deaf Connect around the cost to the Australian economy of not providing these sorts of accessible education services and things like that for Deaf people, because the impact is huge. The school needs to completely encompass, and we just cannot afford not to do it. We really, honestly cannot afford not to do it. Our kids now are coming through as isolated little islands out there, feeling so alone and not understanding the world that they live in because they cannot simply access the understanding to work it all out.

As an interpreter I see it all the time: that living in the community these kids grow up with significant mental health issues. As Laisarn Leong said previously, she did not find the community till she was 20. When you cannot find your village, when you cannot find your people, until 20, the amount of damage that has been done is very difficult to repair linguistically and language literacy wise, mental health wise. You never, ever catch up. You never, ever catch up.

The situation in Canberra is that there is such a lack of services that people in their 20s—they are 25; they are 30—find the Deaf community and it is expected by everyone else that the Deaf community will fix them. "This is what our person needs. You fix them now. Give them Auslan. Let them have access to Auslan. You fix them." They do not have the skills to fix them. We are all the same. We just do not have the wherewithal, and it goes right back to the day of diagnosis.

At a hub, what my vision would be is that it is not just Auslan-using kids; all Deaf and hard of hearing kids go to this school and those Deaf and hard of hearing kids can access Auslan if they want to. They may want it in maths. They may want it in science, but they do not want it in PE. Fine. It is their choice, but they have those skills for when they progress to university, and they know how to use interpreters. It is already there and everyone is communicating on exactly the same level, with the same language, regardless of whether they are deaf or hard of hearing.

MR DAVIS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: You have spoken very passionately about concerns for Deaf Canberrans. You are one of a small number of Auslan interpreters in Canberra, with a very small but connected Deaf community. What impact does having so many demands on your services have on you?

Ms Dolejsi: Personally?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Dolejsi: It is a little bit different for me, in that I also live within the community. My boundaries are a little bit more blurred than some of the other interpreters, although there are some new interpreters who have just come through who are also members of the Deaf community. There is a level additional support. I am not sure how to term it. I do not know whether I feel like I am a little bit more responsible—I am not quite sure what the term is—to try and make sure that this opportunity is something that we really grab on to. With the disability strategy that the minister spoke about, I think we have our ducks in a row a little bit. We are trying to get things changed.

MS LAWDER: With respect to looking after yourself or how it impacts on you, do you interpreters have access to professional supervision or someone who debriefs with you?

Ms Dolejsi: We all generally do have a person that we debrief with. If we are working for an agency then we have access to counselling and things like that. Yes, we do. It is quite well set up.

THE CHAIR: On that note, Ms Dolejsi, thank you for appearing today. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to check for any errors. Thank you.

FARRER, DR LOUISE, Senior Research Fellow, Australian National University

THE CHAIR: Welcome. We move to the next witness appearing today, Dr Farrer. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement provided to you?

Dr Farrer: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Dr Farrer: Yes. I just want to thank the committee for this opportunity and thank you for holding this inquiry. I am here today as a hearing mum of a Deaf son. I am really here to speak on behalf of him, and about what we have learned as a family through our experiences of raising him so far and what our hopes for the future are for him, in terms of his access to language and communication.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Following the birth of your son and identifying that there were auditory issues, how did you connect with the Deaf community and relevant services?

Dr Farrer: This was something that we had to do completely by ourselves, as a family. We are a hearing family. Our son, Milo, who is now three, was diagnosed with profound deafness when he was five weeks old. He is the first Deaf person that we have ever met and known. We were provided with so much support around developing spoken language We were connected with services to help him get cochlear implants, to get speech therapy and to develop his spoken language, but there was no pathway provided for us in terms of accepting and getting to know his deafness and growing that as part of his identity.

There was just an assumption that, as a hearing family, we would not want to go down a pathway of learning Auslan, that we would actually be focusing on spoken language and that would be where we would go with Milo. And so, as a family, we had to connect ourselves. We had to learn about the Deaf community in Canberra. We had to research and educate ourselves about Auslan and about how to access Auslan, where we might be able to learn it. We have gone on a complex and challenging but really beautiful journey to try and learn about Milo and what he needs and growing his Deaf identity in a bilingual way, as well as his spoken language. So it is really something we have had to advocate for and pursue ourselves.

THE CHAIR: How would you have preferred things to have played out, in terms of being connected into the Auslan community?

Dr Farrer: It would have been great, I think, for us to just have at least had some early conversations and connections either with members of the Deaf community or with peak organisations representing Deaf Australians. That was not even provided to us as an option or just to even learn about what it is like to be Deaf and to have a member of your family that is Deaf. As I said, this was a completely new thing for us.

We had absolutely no idea.

Just as a starting point, like Mandy was saying, from the point of diagnosis, having it even provided to us as being an option—that you might want to embark on this journey to learn Auslan and to learn more about the Deaf community—would have been super beneficial for us as well. The focus was really on: how do we change his deafness? How do we fix his deafness and have him learn a spoken language, essentially? That is kind of how it was put to us.

MR DAVIS: Dr Farrer, I am interested in your recommendation 5, about a demonstration primary and high school. You have been here for a while, so you have probably seen the line of questioning I have had about what that might look like.

Dr Farrer: Yes.

MR DAVIS: You also just spoke about raising Milo as bilingual. I am interested if you would expand on that a little bit more for the committee. We have heard this option of learning spoken word and having cochlear implants or learning Auslan. So your journey through raising Milo as bilingual is interesting. Regarding your demonstration primary and high school site, I am also interested in your expanding on that a bit more. Does that look like a conventional primary or high school, where instead of learning Indonesian or Japanese you learn Auslan, or are you talking about something that is a lot more integrated and fifty-fifty?

Dr Farrer: Good question. Backing up a little bit from that, it is really interesting. I have connected with a number of hearing families of Deaf children from around Australia and I am starting to learn a little bit about the differences in other parts of Australia compared to Canberra. Something that is really missing in Canberra, right from that very early age, is access to early intervention playgroups and providers and preschools and day-care centres that have any access to Auslan. We have had to provide resources to Milo's day care just to learn some basic Auslan.

There is no opportunity for there to be immersive, group early intervention and education experiences for Deaf children and hearing children together, with Deaf mentors, teachers of the Deaf, qualified Auslan instructors to provide that really early access and that early tutoring in Auslan. It should then move through to there being the availability of a preschool in Canberra that has Auslan either as an additional language or in a fifty-fifty way that combines both Deaf children and hearing children so that hearing children have that access to Auslan as well.

Then it should move into a primary school setting, potentially in Canberra, where there would be priority access for Deaf children or children with hearing loss, where Auslan would be the second language or the additional language that is spoken, but in quite an immersive way, like Mandy was suggesting, where hearing children are also learning Auslan so that Deaf children have the opportunity to sign with their hearing peers on the playground as well as in the classroom. I see it then moving through, having that cohort and those peer relationships and the connectedness from an accessibility perspective but also from an inclusion perspective, so that children can see a place for themselves both within the Deaf community and within the hearing community, really building those bridges, rather than keeping things necessarily separate.

At least for Milo, what we are learning about with him is that his cochlear implants provide access to sound. He is learning spoken language. But even at three years old he is starting to teach us. He is showing a preference to take those processors off throughout the day because he wants a break. It is hard work for him. He experiences a lot of listening fatigue. There are a lot of impacts on him in paying attention to sound, learning spoken language.

When he has those devices off, he cannot hear anything and we do not have any way of communicating with him without Auslan. So it is really important for us, and important for him, that he has that additional mode of communication in a really full way because that is full access to language and that helps him to grow his communication. It is access to education. It is all of those things. That is what I mean by bilingual—for him to be able to traverse both of those worlds and make that choice for himself to engage in the hearing world and also to choose to not do that when it is impacting him.

MR DAVIS: Thank you, Dr Farrer. This is a similar question that I asked Mr Clarke and that I asked Mandy, but it is important to get on the record. The cynic in me thinks that the resistance to such a school will always be, “We can’t afford that,” or “There is not the population to sustain that.” As a hearing person, you have introduced Milo to your friends and family. You have these conversations with people in your world all the time. Do you believe that there would be enough Canberra parents who would have the appetite to send their hearing child to a school that was bilingual in Auslan?

Dr Farrer: Absolutely. This is something that I have learned through not only conversations with my own family network, my broader friends network but my broader social network and community, our neighbours. The way we talk about Milo, and when we introduce Milo to the community, there is such strong interest, not only in his deafness and his Deaf identity and wanting to learn more about that. When we talk about learning Auslan, overwhelmingly the response I get from people is to say, “I would love to learn Auslan. That is something that has always been on my list. I would love that.”

I think COVID has really changed that. I think that has exposed the community much more to the richness of Auslan and the importance of it as a language in our society. I think there is a massive appetite for hearing families and hearing children to have that access. I think about how accessible and how inclusive it is—that it is such a skill to have Auslan, have a language like that—and the usefulness to be able to communicate with people with hearing loss and members of the Deaf community is just so important. So, yes, I cannot emphasise that strongly enough. That is definitely my sense.

MR DAVIS: Tremendous. Thank you, Dr Farrer.

MS LAWDER: Thanks for coming in. In your submission you say that what has been missing in your son’s care is his and your family’s access to learning Auslan. How did you learn Auslan? Where did you go?

Dr Farrer: Yes. We started with apps. We started looking online. We downloaded Auslan Tutor. We started looking at apps, and this was just to start Milo and us off with some basic functional signs. That is not language. That is not full Auslan. But that was just some key word signs to get us going. I started, myself, learning introductory Auslan courses through the Deaf Society. That was the first step.

We had to advocate quite strongly, within Milo's NDIS support, for funding to support us to get an Auslan tutor to come to our home. We currently have Auslan in the home, but we have had to really strongly push for that. I think there was a belief within Milo's NDIS support that he has cochlear implants, he is accessing speech therapy, and so it is one or the other. That is it. He gets access to that. But, as we know, and as I said before, when he does not have his devices on, he is Deaf and he will always be Deaf. So it is really important for us to have both of those ways to be able to communicate with him. So that is how we are learning Auslan at the moment.

Part of the barrier to that, which I think other people may have spoken about or talked about in their submissions as well, is that capacity is an issue in the ACT. There are waiting lists. I know from our experience, and also from the experiences of other families I have spoken to who want to access the Auslan in the home services, that you need to go on a wait list for that sort of availability. As that appetite grows, it will be really great to be able to put resourcing into attracting and bringing more qualified Auslan instructors into the ACT to provide those services for families.

MS LAWDER: Have you been able to—and, if so, how—ripple that outward to grandparents and siblings, who I guess are covered by Auslan in the home, but also to neighbours? How might they become part of your community with Milo?

Dr Farrer: Great question. That is a really big challenge because it is not appropriate for me to be teaching my family members and my general community Auslan. That needs to come from somebody within the Deaf community who is fluent in Auslan and has that as their native language. That is a big challenge. We can obviously share some of the signs that we are using with Milo, but they operate on a very basic functional level. Members of our family have taken it upon themselves to go and also seek out Auslan courses and learning. It is really not a model where we go then out and teach our family or our community, because that is just not an appropriate way to acquire Auslan language. But, yes, there needs to be, again, the availability of classes and the availability of tutoring to provide those services for people connected to Deaf people.

MS LAWDER: I think 20 years ago we were all so excited by the technological miracle of the cochlear implant and "fixing" Deaf people. Do you feel the pendulum has swung back to the bilingual approach, using Auslan as the first language to enable you perhaps to learn English, rather than "cochlear implants and you are done"? You referred to that a little bit.

Dr Farrer: It is so interesting that you mention that. I have to say that there are a lot of really different opinions. I can really only speak from own experience and also the experiences of the other families I have met, who are predominantly hearing families with Deaf children. This is, again, a very new experience for them. They are not as familiar with the Deaf community or may not have any familiarity with the Deaf community. There are certainly some attitudes among hearing families of Deaf children that they have little interest in learning Auslan because they see the cochlear implants and spoken language as being their primary focus.

I have to say, though, that there is a bit of a groundswell. There is a change happening. It is certainly my hope that hearing families of Deaf children start to understand and meet their Deaf children where they are at and take it upon themselves to learn about their Deaf child and what it is like to be Deaf. The way that they can learn that is through connection with the Deaf community, because the people with lived Deaf experience are the people to teach us, as hearing people, what it feels like to be Deaf and what it is like to have Auslan and the importance of that for their own identity.

I am still learning that. I have got a long way to go, as a hearing person, a lot to learn about that, but my hope is that my son has access to that too, for all the reasons that Mandy suggested. I want to protect his mental health. I want to protect his education. I want to protect his identity and his ability to thrive and I want him to be a full person who is proud of his deafness. We are, as his family, so it is really important for us that we foster that attitude within our family and, much more broadly, that that goes out within our community as well. It is my hope to create that.

MS LAWDER: I do not have a Deaf child, so I really have no experience in this.

Dr Farrer: I am new as well. My son is only three.

MS LAWDER: Some hearing parents who have a Deaf child, I guess, want their child to be like them and to be hearing. Do you think that is what is going on or is it just a lack of understanding or knowledge of the Deaf community?

Dr Farrer: Absolutely. I think it is a really big and emotional journey when your child is diagnosed with deafness or diagnosed with hearing loss as a baby. We felt completely overwhelmed. We had no idea, and it was scary at first. It was hard because we had no idea what to expect. We had worries for Milo's future. It is a hearing world. We had no idea how he would go in life. As a parent, my brain is thinking about: "What is he going to be like, growing up? Is it going to be difficult for him in the world?" And there is so much comfort and so much hope and so much joy that have I learned.

Learning about what it is like to be Deaf and learning from people in the Deaf community teaching me what that is like—that has given me nothing but joy and hope for his future. So I would say that any worries that I had about Milo being Deaf are gone because I know that he has language, he has a community and he has an identity. Again, I would never want my son to be like me or to be like the hearing world. I think that, as a hearing world, we have a lot of work to do to meet him where he is at. My hope is that we can learn more and that those attitudes are changing as well.

THE CHAIR: One very quick one before we conclude. The parent-run Auslan playgroup you are involved in: does that group receive any support from any community organisations or the ACT government?

Dr Farrer: Good question. I believe they have applied for grants. There are some small community-based grants that they have gotten, to get some resources, but it has really been a ground-led, parent-led initiative, which is, I can tell you, a lifeline. It is absolutely fantastic and something that I believe should be much more heavily resourced and formalised into something that people can have much more awareness of and have access to. It has been such an incredible thing for our family and for our son, and also for the other families that are involved.

THE CHAIR: Very good recommendation. Dr Farrer, thank you for appearing today. When a transcript is available, it will be forwarded to you to check, to identify any errors. Thank you.

Dr Farrer: Thank you so much.

BOERSIG, DR JOHN, Chief Executive Officer, Legal Aid ACT
FARRELL, MS ANGELA, Disability Justice Liaison Officer, Legal Aid ACT

THE CHAIR: We move on to the next witnesses appearing today, Dr Boersig and Ms Farrell, on behalf of Legal Aid ACT. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement provided to you?

Dr Boersig: I do.

Ms Farrell: I do.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions from the committee, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Dr Boersig: I would like to ask my colleague if she would make a first statement. Her role in the organisation is as disability justice officer, as part of our community liaison unit, and she is on the ground working with people every day of the week in this area.

Ms Farrell: Thanks, John. Firstly, thank you for the opportunity to speak. I think for me, and in my professional experience, the crux of this is about the availability of interpreters. A lot of my work is done liaising with the court system. It is the court's responsibility to organise interpreters. What we are finding is that in an everyday sense what is more likely to happen is that the procedure is followed, in terms of making those booking arrangements, but due to the simple fact of availability those bookings do not always eventuate into an interpreter on the ground.

What we would normally do is try to double up on that work by contacting the courts and the protection unit, or whichever unit is organising it, to see if we can contribute additional bookings—if we can try and secure different interpreters to have a better chance of them actually being there on the day. But I think the most common experience from my work is that they are often not available. I have seen that most commonly when we require both an Auslan and a Deaf interpreter. The Deaf interpreter is the one that is really difficult to get.

THE CHAIR: In your submission you advocate for the right to an interpreter to be added to the Human Rights Act. Do you think this legislative change would have tangible benefits?

Dr Boersig: We both worked on the submission, so, Angela, please add anything. But, yes, I think there are some things in our submission that can be done without money. One of the things is to use the legislation that we have here in the ACT, which is almost unique—not quite unique, but it is pretty basic and important for the ACT—around human rights. So, yes, I think it would be well to bring out this issue. I think what we try and demonstrate, and what you have just heard from Ms Farrell, is that on the ground things do not always work as best as we would like them. I think you have got an opportunity here, in relation to the act, to improve that situation.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: Not that I disagree with you, but can I play devil's advocate and be a bit of a contrarian? It would appear to me that your submission, as well as everyone we have heard from today, has spoken about the lack of qualified Auslan interpreters. Were we to prioritise reforming the Human Rights Act and setting it up as an obligation, are we not just setting ourselves up to fail if we are not recruiting and training enough qualified Auslan interpreters?

Ms Farrell: In my professional work that is my priority: the availability of interpreters and the qualifications of those interpreters. I am a hearing person and I come from a hearing family. It is a privilege to work alongside my Deaf clients. I have worked with Deaf colleagues in the past, and I think that something that is very apparent in the submissions is the issue we have with the small community here in Canberra and the effect that has on having an interpreter and the other connections that the client may have with that interpreter and how that affects the confidentiality of the information being shared. So, yes, I agree: the sheer number of interpreters is a priority.

MR DAVIS: The case studies were useful to really, I think, stress to the committee how this actually plays out in real time. I will not hold you to a figure, but roughly—I know that is not how lawyers speak—how many times does a Deaf or hard of hearing person have a challenging relationship with the justice system because an interpreter was planned and was not available? In one particular case study you note that an issue was time sensitive, and I imagine most cases at the courts are, with an interpreter cancelling at short notice but the judge making the decision that that had to go ahead. That is mortifying. How often does that happen?

Ms Farrell: I have been in this role for less than 12 months. I have seen that happen, I would say, maybe six or seven times.

MR DAVIS: Wow!

Ms Farrell: Not in that exact situation. I think it is important to note also the resourcefulness of the Deaf community, and the disabled community more broadly. For the clients that I work with, often it is not the first time they have faced this challenge and they come with a whole toolkit of ideas before we even get started. I have worked with a number of clients who paid private subscription fees to have on-demand Auslan interpreting services via their iPad. That comes with its own challenges, a simple one being the internet connectivity in certain buildings. So I think that it is common, but I am also aware of Legal Aid clients that I do not have any interactions with and that the lawyers work with directly who come up with their own innovative solutions for that, so I definitely cannot speak for the whole picture.

MR DAVIS: These innovative solutions that you talk about: are we just talking using the Notes app on the phone? How innovative are these innovative solutions? Is it writing things out?

Ms Farrell: Yes, sometimes, and bringing people along, which is pretty problematic for some of the matters that we are seeing, especially in the family violence or family dispute resolution context. Bringing a family member along on the assumption that there may not be an interpreter present is a challenge. I mentioned the private subscription services too, interpreting services. That is basically a subscription account that the client will have. We may need an interpreter and they will make that call and be connected to someone through a switchboard and then that interpreter becomes available via the screen and we can use them. What I have learnt from the Deaf community, though, is the importance of having an interpreter face to face and in the room and how important it is to have those discrete facial expressions and the body language, how important that is for the language.

MR DAVIS: Were the ACT government to recruit and employ a full-time, permanent interpreter at the courthouse, in that sort of area—everything is all together there—do you believe there would be enough work in your average 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, to keep that person busy?

Ms Farrell: I do. I really do. I am very happy to do what I can in my role, but it also sometimes feels somewhat inappropriate when I get called over to support a Deaf person, as a hearing person. I undertake Auslan lessons privately, but I have actually hit a snag in that because the stage where I am up to, the next teacher available for that unit is hearing and there is a cultural issue with learning Auslan from a hearing person. So I am really happy to help where I can, but I do believe that there are lots of incidents of Deaf people trying to access the court system where, based on previous experience or what they have heard from the community, they would see it as easier to just push on and to not go through that process of trying to engage the court system to get the right interpreter. So from my professional experience, I would see the need, yes.

MR DAVIS: All right. In summary, to put a bow on your point, for those playing at home, you would argue that Deaf and hard of hearing people accused of a crime currently risk miscarriages of justice due to their lack of access to an interpreter?

Ms Farrell: I cannot speak to that. The clients that I have worked with have not been accused of crimes. They have had other interactions with the justice system, but not as the accused.

MR DAVIS: I see. That makes sense. But, based on your last example, do you believe there are deaf and hard of hearing people in our community who are avoiding reporting crimes for fear of having to access a criminal justice system that does not support their deafness?

Ms Farrell: Without speculating, I have had interactions with a client who presented to the court for family violence support. She had, arguably, a bad experience with the availability of interpreters. She did not re-engage and the proceeding did not go any further. I cannot speak to why that was, but it was a disappointing experience from my end.

MR DAVIS: Okay. Thank you.

Ms Farrell: Thank you.

MS LAWDER: I was just looking, for example, at your case study No 3, about a Deaf client who could not get an interpreter and it was unclear whether an interstate interpreter would be paid for. It seems to me that the client was still required to attend the hearing in person, without an interpreter. I am not sure what the technical term is because I am not a lawyer, but surely that is a risk to our justice system—expecting people to attend and not actually understanding or following what is going on?

Dr Boersig: That is what interpreting is all about: to make sure that people understand what is happening and can make informed decisions. That is our job. Ultimately, the court runs its proceedings as it sees fit on the day, but, picking up the point from before, we think people need to be there to make sure that they understand the proceedings.

As I was indicating before, I think there are some practice directions that could be made by the court that would remedy that. Sorry; we have not numbered our submission, but you will see on what should be page 6 that we have made some suggestions around that, under "Strengthening the court's processes and procedures". All that could be done by a practice direction from the Chief Magistrate and the Chief Justice. In addition, the clarification that comes out of this case study is something that could be easily spoken about.

MS LAWDER: Have you had any experience with Deaf people saying, "Yes, I will be able to follow," but you are actually unsure how much they are following of the proceedings?

Ms Farrell: I will just think for a second on that. Yes, I think is the short answer. Like we said, a lot of these matters are time sensitive and very emotionally distressing to participate in, so I have seen clients have a preference to simply push on, so to speak. Regarding that case study 3 that we spoke about, I was not directly involved with that client, but I did consult with the solicitor afterwards about how that went. From my understanding, the situation was that as the lawyer had been given instructions; that is why it was able to proceed. The client was there yet could not follow the proceedings, so that, I think, was an additional challenge—that the court was told that the lawyer had been instructed and that is why it went ahead.

MS LAWDER: Interesting. With your suggestions there, it looks like there are some very logical things that could be done, on the court's side, at least, to improve matters. We have also heard similar things with respect to not specifically your issue. In theory, Deaf people are now allowed to do jury duty, but they face the same challenges in accessing interpreters, so it is a constant theme, I think, that we have been hearing today. Regarding the protocols that you have included, the interpreter protocols, do you work to these protocols or are they the court's protocols?

Dr Boersig: This is the courts, but, yes, we do work toward these protocols and we have got an obligation to, wherever we can, as Angela said, improve the communication. It is at the essence of this process. If you cannot communicate with someone, how can you present their views or how can they understand the processes? Whether it is issues such as Deaf interpretation or a language issue, that is our job: to try and do as best we can. It is highly frustrating for everyone, and particularly the client or the witness, if they cannot participate.

THE CHAIR: Are there any issues with the interpreter protocols?

Dr Boersig: No; I think it is a good protocol. We do not have a problem with the words and we are not being critical of the courts and what they are presenting, but, as you have heard from us, because of the lack of interpreters it is difficult to implement the protocols. That is the point we are really trying to make here: we have got to step back and look at how do we get the resources to provide that at the courts?

THE CHAIR: There is one section of protocols that your submission goes to. This section of the protocols specifically states that in civil matters, appeal and other non-criminal matters in the courts, parties are required to organise interpreters at their own costs, including for witnesses that require an interpreter. Is that an issue?

Dr Boersig: That is an issue and I think we make a point about that—that, really, why should that be the case? Civil issues are crucial to people in the way they interact and manage their disputes, and they fill up a lot of the court's time.

THE CHAIR: I am not a lawyer and I am not across the court protocols, but what is the appropriate way to have issues like that in the protocols addressed? Is that a recommendation from this committee or is that within the courts?

Dr Boersig: To be candid, what we will do arising, from this committee and our report, is write to the court and say, "Look, we have had this discussion. We made this submission. Here is a copy. We are not being critical, but we think things could change and improve and we will be seeking to engage with the Chief Justice and the Chief Magistrate as well." But anything you can say to support that would be of use to our point of view.

THE CHAIR: Noted. Any further questions?

MR DAVIS: Just one. This might be cheeky, because I cannot imagine you can speak to it too much, but we have not received a submission from ACT Policing; nor are they appearing today. The work that you do and the people that you support and the criminal justice system are intrinsically linked. Do you have any examples or any advice for the committee in deliberating on how we can support Deaf people and hard of hearing people in their interactions with the police, based on your experiences?

Dr Boersig: Yes. Generally, we go to the Chief of Police in this context. We run an afterhours disability service, for example, for people who are arrested. We try and work with the police to improve those services. There are disability justice officers or liaison officers now across the ACT, including in the AFP, and we try and work and leverage through there as best we can. It is ultimately a decision by the police, of course, about how they train and what resources they put against this.

Ms Farrell: The only thing I would add is that I think the practical implications of dealings with the police are that it is often very urgent. It is happening right now; there is no appointment, there is no plan and there is no time to organise things. So if an interpreter is not available, just practically, they go without. I cannot speak to it in my professional role, but I have personally had interactions with the Deaf community.

The example I am thinking of is being stopped in a traffic check and the need to pick up your phone to get an interpreter or to tell the officer that they are Deaf. You are not allowed to touch your phone when you have been stopped, so that is just a very practical implication. That is, I think, just the time sensitive nature of all the work that the AFP do.

MR DAVIS: That makes sense. Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, thank you, Dr Boersig and Ms Farrell, for appearing today on behalf of Legal Aid ACT. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you.

Dr Boersig: Indeed. Thank you for the opportunity.

Ms Farrell: Thank you.

SCOTT, DR KAYE, Chairperson, National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf (NAATD)

THE CHAIR: We move to the next witness appearing today, Dr Kaye Scott, on behalf of the National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement provided to you?

Dr Scott: I do; thank you.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions from the committee, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Dr Scott: Yes. I will try and be brief. I would just like to say thank you for this opportunity. The National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf is the peak body for teachers of the Deaf in Australia. We have a membership of over 300 teachers from all states and territories in Australia. Membership on the national committee comprises some of the most experienced professionals in the field.

As a representative, the views that I state today will be the views of the majority of the committee, not my own personal views. Personally, I have been a teacher for over 40 years and a teacher of the Deaf for 30 years. I have worked with many interpreters, Auslan role models, and I have worked in government as well, as a project manager and acting Director of the Victorian Deaf Education Institute.

It was really interesting listening to the parent that we had, Dr Farrer, presenting. It was one of a multitude of views that I have heard parents espouse over a number of years. It was really interesting to hear her viewpoint, which does not reflect all parents; it is one of a number of points of view about using Auslan and being an Auslan user.

Where Deaf and hard of hearing children with the very newest, best hearing assistive technology do not receive sufficient auditory input to develop a mastery of English speech and language, and for those born into culturally Deaf families who use Auslan as their first language, their L1, it is really important that their base language is developed, because that is how they develop an understanding of English and how to understand to read and write. So that provision of service to support their development of Auslan is really important in developing an ability to learn a second language, which is English, and learning to read and write in English.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. I will lead off with the questions and we will make our way through the committee. We spend a lot of time in this place talking about a national teacher shortage. Is there a shortage of teachers of the Deaf?

Dr Scott: Absolutely. Most states and territories experience the same shortage of interpreters and teachers of the Deaf. Teachers of the Deaf are in short supply. Becoming a teacher of the Deaf is usually incumbent on people who have experience and want to work in that field. There is no further remuneration, though, increasing remuneration, for becoming a teacher of the Deaf.

THE CHAIR: Can you give any indication as to how many teachers of the Deaf there are in Canberra?

Dr Scott: Great question. I have absolutely no idea. We know that in Australia we have far more than 300 teachers of the Deaf. We are actually involved in a piece of research; we are setting up a research committee to try and look at where kids are who are deaf and hard of hearing throughout Australia, where teachers of the Deaf are and to get those numbers, but at the moment I cannot give you any numbers.

THE CHAIR: Are there any jurisdictions or maybe even cities or locations that you can identify that do have a sufficient supply of teachers of the Deaf? Or is it quite literally everywhere across the country that there is a shortage?

Dr Scott: It is a revolving door, and some education departments are very good at sponsoring and training teachers of the Deaf to meet their supply. Take New South Wales for instance; they have a number of scholarships. When they know that there are positions that are going to be vacated, they will actually train teachers to become teachers of the Deaf. It is very similar in WA. Victoria where I come from, is a little more ad hoc. Having worked in central government for 10 years, we tried to address that through the use of scholarships to train teachers to become teachers of the Deaf.

THE CHAIR: You have mentioned scholarships for other jurisdictions. Do you know if the ACT government provides any scholarships?

Dr Scott: I am not aware that they do.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: Dr Scott, in August the federal education minister, Jason Clare, announced the national action plan on the teacher shortage. Did your organisation participate in that in any way?

Dr Scott: We did not and we were not asked to participate.

MR DAVIS: I see. That leads to my next question. Obviously, our ACT Minister for Disability and ACT Minister for Education and Youth Affairs would represent the ACT's view on a national body, a national forum on these issues. What message, on behalf of the ACT government and for those in the ACT who are deaf or hard of hearing, would you encourage them to make in those forums on this question?

Dr Scott: That there is a continuing and ongoing need for teachers of the Deaf to work with children who are deaf and hard of hearing, not only those who use Auslan, because children who are deaf and hard of hearing generally require additional support to make the gains necessary to keep up the academic rigor associated with school as they progress through.

MR DAVIS: Has your organisation had any meetings or any relationship with any other state and territory, either education or disability ministers, to represent your views and your organisation in these national fora?

Dr Scott: Not at the moment. I am a new chair. I only took over in May and we have not, to this point. But we would welcome the opportunity to do that.

MR DAVIS: Thank you very much.

MS LAWDER: Dr Scott, can you just confirm: with the right supports in place, will a Deaf child achieve the same at the end of year 12 as a hearing child?

Dr Scott: What a question! It would be lovely to be able to say yes, but children who are deaf and hard of hearing represent the population on a continuum, from achievement to non-achievement. There are always going to be some children who are deaf or hard of hearing who do not finish education, just as there will always be children who are not deaf or hard of hearing who do not finish education. What we know is that worldwide we do not have enough information on that. Connie Mayer and Beverly Trezek did the last study, in 2018, regarding outcomes of children who are deaf and hard of hearing.

We know that kids who have got cochlear implants actually have better outcomes, particularly when it comes to reading and writing, than children who have other assistive technology. We know that over the last 20 years there has been a slight increase in outcomes for children who are deaf and hard of hearing at the end of school, but there are a significant number of children who are still below the expected level at the end of school age, by year 12. We know that if we do not catch them up and keep on giving continual support, that gap gets wider.

I will also say that we have an amazing study being completed by NAL, the National Acoustic Laboratories, which is led by Dr Teresa Ching. It is a longitudinal study. It is a study of over 400 students and those children are being tracked from birth. They are now at 13 years of age, so that will give us some interesting information about what is happening to our students in a longitudinal nature.

MS LAWDER: Thanks.

Dr Scott: Sorry. Probably a very long answer.

THE CHAIR: No; it is a good thing.

MR DAVIS: Dr Scott, do you see it as the role of the federal government or state and territory governments to train and then subsequently employ Auslan interpreters, or is the crisis so bad at this point that we will take help from anyone who is giving it?

Dr Scott: For what purpose are you talking about? Education or—

MR DAVIS: Education, yes; for teaching in schools.

Dr Scott: Educational interpreters?

MR DAVIS: Yes.

Dr Scott: Interesting point. You know, in an ideal world it would be the commonwealth, because then we would have equity throughout Australia. We know that in learning Auslan, as with learning any language, it takes around 10,000 hours to be competent in the language. That is about three years of full-time study. We know the best interpreters are CODAs, children of Deaf adults, who have been brought up with Auslan as their first language.

We know that there is a real dearth of interpreters in education. The rate of pay—and I think we attached the ASLIA submission to our submission—for qualified interpreters is very low, so we have people who move into education and act as educational interpreters, build their skills and then leave the school system. It is a complex area. It has got to do with pay and it has got to do with equity and it has got to do with availability.

MS LAWDER: In your submission you mentioned the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, general comment number 4: the right to inclusive education. Have there been many cases of people making human rights complaints regarding the UN convention, do you know? Are you aware of that?

Dr Scott: There have been a couple of significant ones that have resulted in some reforms over the years: a particular case in Queensland and one in Victoria in about 2011. There have not been any recent cases. Inclusion is a really interesting thing, because under that convention it also says, contrary to other people's advice, that there should not be segregated schools. That is what, certainly in Victoria, we are moving towards.

However, in Victoria we have one of the only segregated schools, which operates very nicely. We also have a number of facilities based within mainstream schools that provide the same sort of support for students who are deaf and hard of hearing, be they Auslan users or non-Auslan users, but that actually create that whole environment of supporting each other. Recently, I attended a conference for leaders in Deaf education in Sydney and we had some speakers down from Griffith University who did not get the whole idea that inclusion does not always work for Deaf children. I was listening very carefully to—I am sorry; I cannot remember your name—

MS LAWDER: Mandy.

Dr Scott: I was listening to Mandy's testimony before, because, yes, Deaf and hard of hearing children do need that support of like-minded people who have the same struggles. They need the expanded core curriculum, which is very different to children who have typical hearing.

MS LAWDER: Maybe for Deaf children that is inclusive education.

Dr Scott: Well, yes. It is the least restricted environment, you can argue, although some academics will not accept that that is inclusion for those children. Having some support from children who are like-minded provides the best inclusion for that group.

MS LAWDER: I think we heard previously from Laisarn that people have a teaching degree and then they do a masters; is that correct?

Dr Scott: Correct; yes.

MS LAWDER: And is there any further study that people can do?

Dr Scott: A doctorate in Deaf education, which is where my doctorate comes from. We do have a number of people undergoing that process at the moment. There are all sorts of ancillary courses that can also enhance people's experience. A lot of people invest a lot of time in learning Auslan, developing their Auslan skills. It can be: how long is a piece of string and where does it fit into the jigsaw puzzle?

MS LAWDER: How much is learning Auslan part of becoming a teacher of the Deaf?

Dr Scott: Currently, we only have three teacher of the Deaf training courses in Australia. When I became a teacher of the Deaf we had nine. We now only have three. There is a requirement to do some Auslan training, but it may be very basic key word training. People come in to be a teacher of the Deaf for various reasons, like family interest. Many, many teachers who have a child who is Deaf or hard of hearing move into Deaf education to learn about what is best for their child, how they can support their child. I can name 10 teachers in Victoria who are in that particular category. Now I have lost my train of thought.

MS LAWDER: This might prompt you. Is there a component of that—

Dr Scott: Of Auslan, yes.

MS LAWDER: about connection and understanding of Deaf culture and the Deaf community as well?

Dr Scott: Absolutely. There is a small component in the University of Melbourne's course. There is a larger component in the course that is run by Renwick, out of Macquarie University, and similarly out of Newcastle University. Professor Greg Leigh and Dr Jill Duncan, who run those two courses, have a large component of Deaf studies or understanding Deaf culture. So even though people may not come out of the course with Auslan skills, they will certainly understand the importance of Deaf culture and Deaf community.

MS LAWDER: Thanks.

THE CHAIR: One of the recurring issues before the committee is appropriate education settings for Deaf children. Are there examples from other jurisdictions, maybe particular schools, that are best practice that the ACT could look to for guidance?

Dr Scott: There are many. I can talk mainly from the Victorian perspective, because that is where my experience comes from.

THE CHAIR: Sure.

Dr Scott: We have, as I said, one of the few segregated schools that goes from foundation through to year 12, which is the Victorian College for the Deaf. The principal there has done an amazing job of turning that school around. Its reputation has actually grown over the last four years exponentially. It is now a fabulous setting for children who are deaf and hard of hearing who use Auslan as their first language.

May I say, often what happens is that children who fail to develop oral language skills will sometimes resort to learning Auslan. It is a fallback position. That is what was happening very much with that school, whereas now Auslan has the importance that it should have as a bilingual language for many students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

I will get back to that, but can I also say that in Victoria we have an excellent process which happens for referral. We have a small committee called VIHSP. After children are identified at birth with a hearing loss—and we know that that is not all children who go on to have a hearing loss—those children who are identified with a hearing loss at birth get referred to this committee.

It works out of the Royal Children's Hospital, and the three people who work there provide support to parents about all the early intervention centres that are available, some of which offer bilingual. This is what the parent who was here, Dr Farrer, said was missing. Something that I think would benefit the ACT is to provide support about all the different services that are available, whether it be an oral only or a bilingual program. We have three in Melbourne. Then it is up to parents to seek out which of those they want to approach and become involved with.

As far as other schools, there are many well-functioning, fantastic Deaf facilities that operate within a primary or a secondary school setting in Victoria. They work very effectively and have the dual benefit of inclusion, so kids attend mainstream classes, they have the support of a teacher of the Deaf in the classroom and they get additional support from a teacher of the Deaf in a small group and one on one.

THE CHAIR: On behalf of the committee, thank you, Dr Scott, for appearing today on behalf of the National Association of Australian Teachers of the Deaf.

Dr Scott: Thank you very much.

THE CHAIR: When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you.

McATAMNEY, MR BEN, National Advocacy Officer, Deafblind Australia

THE CHAIR: We move to the next witness appearing today, Mr McAtamney, on behalf of Deafblind Australia. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement that has been provided to you?

Mr McAtamney: Yes; no problem.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions from the committee, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Mr McAtamney: No; happy to go straight to questions if the committee has any.

THE CHAIR: All right. I will lead off with questions and we will make our way through the committee. What are the unique needs of deafblind people?

Mr McAtamney: The deafblind community is incredibly diverse. It includes people with a range of conditions and a range of communication needs and preferences. In terms of the scope of the discussion here today, we are talking primarily about a group of people with a condition called Usher syndrome, specifically Usher syndrome type 1. The majority of people in that group have an experience where they are born Deaf. They often grow up attending Deaf schools, are a part of the Deaf community, and then they have a vision impairment or a vision loss that tends to come on in a degenerative fashion later in life.

This is a group of people that requires different services from interpreters—so interpreters using modified forms of Auslan, be that a visual frame Auslan, tactile Auslan, deafblind finger spelling, things of that nature. There are a range of different communication approaches that can be taken. People in that community also rely pretty extensively on a type of support worker called a communication guide. That is somebody with Auslan skills who is not a qualified interpreter, who is not experienced or skilled enough in the use of both languages to act as a true linguistic and cultural mediator but who can provide some sort of basic communication support for things like shopping and everyday activities.

THE CHAIR: I am very curious—and I am not sure if you have got a specific number for me—but roughly how many people are deafblind in the ACT?

Mr McAtamney: In the ACT I do not have a specific figure, unfortunately. It is a very, very difficult thing to get accurate numbers on because of the range of diagnoses and the range of reasons that somebody can develop a dual sensory loss. But it is estimated that somewhere in the vicinity of around 100,000 people nationally fall into that category, and the vast majority of those are over 65.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. Very helpful.

MS LAWDER: Good afternoon.

Mr McAtamney: Good afternoon.

MS LAWDER: I note that in your submission you talk about aged care. We have heard about that, throughout the course of the hearings today, for older people who are Deaf—people who are already Deaf and they are getting older and looking at aged care and the prospects of isolation if they are amongst people who do not know any sign language, for example. Are you aware of any examples of appropriate aged care for people who are deafblind?

Mr McAtamney: Unfortunately, the consistent theme across a lot of service provision for deafblind people is, as described to us, “pockets of better but nothing really great”. In terms of appropriate aged care, I am definitely aware of people who are in an aged-care setting and who are being well supported within that setting. Fundamentally, the difference comes down to access to language in the environment and having people around the person in that care setting who can communicate in Auslan. Blind awareness training amongst staff is sadly lacking. But it really is about awareness and language access. Those are the two things that, when they are set up in a way that is appropriate and tailored to the individual that they are supposed to be providing the support to, can have huge impacts, particularly for people in aged-care environments.

MS LAWDER: I presume, then, that if you turn 65 you lose your NDIS package, or does it continue?

Mr McAtamney: I am not sure of the particulars, to be honest. I know that there are a lot of people in the deafblind community that were not NDIS eligible at the time that it was brought in because of their age and that there are ongoing issues, particularly with people that are on the Disability Support for Older Australians Program. But if you are registered with the NDIS before 65, I do not know that that terminates when you turn 65.

MS LAWDER: So they may be able to take their support package with them into aged care, potentially.

Mr McAtamney: I cannot definitely say either way, unfortunately. I really do not know.

MS LAWDER: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: Thank you, Ben, and thank you particularly for explaining that the majority of the people you represent are in that over-65 age cohort. I will keep my questions on aged care as well. Can you give the committee an example of a facility you are aware of in Australia that you would describe as best practice, where the people at the intersection of Deaf and blind are getting the very best care? We hear horror stories of where people are not, but what should we in Canberra aspire to and where should we look?

Mr McAtamney: Unfortunately, I do not think there is one that I could point to and say, “This is the best practice model.” It tends to be luck of the draw in terms of whether or not the particular facility has a staff member there, usually in a leadership position, who understands the gravity of language access and is therefore able to champion and push that training and that skill development among their staff.

But then it is also the case that people are, again, lucky enough to have informal support networks that are local to them—maybe through a church group or somewhere like that, where they are often tasked to do the deafblind training, doing the language instruction themselves, and they build a more effective system of supports. A lot of the labour is done by the deafblind person, and whether or not they are given the time and attention and the resources to do that is largely luck of the draw at the moment.

MR DAVIS: The problem seems so big that you almost say, "Where to start?" If I were to ask you, Ben, with an infinite supply of money and resources and people, where you would start, what would you tell me?

Mr McAtamney: The two biggest things that we hear from our membership all the time that are impacting them are really the state of the workforce, both through interpreters and communication guides, which I am sure you have heard about with other people appearing here, but also the complete lack of awareness about deafblindness and about how to support deafblind people—even, and perhaps especially, in the disability sector and within sectors of health care.

Given the time and resources, we would love to see both communication guiding and Auslan interpreting addressed as a critical national skills shortage and for investment to be put to incentivise people into these roles. These are very demanding roles. They are roles that have a lot of barriers to entry and they are roles that do not offer a lot in terms of job security, in terms of the sorts of things that would attract people to go in there, particularly at the beginning of their career.

It is about investment in recruiting and building a workforce, and investment to embed that deafblind awareness training into existing programs for allied health, and particularly interpreting. We still do not teach deafblind interpreting as part of Auslan interpreting courses. I think that there needs to be more of a general awareness-raising campaign around the role that language access plays in creating an instance of disability, to really ram it home to the community at large the capacity that we all have, as members of the mainstream community, to either exacerbate or alleviate the instance of disability, based on our own choices and the decisions we make at an individual level or at an organisational level.

MR DAVIS: Perfect answer. Thank you, Ben.

Mr McAtamney: You are very welcome, sir.

THE CHAIR: So not all certified Auslan interpreters are qualified to be deafblind interpreters? Any idea of what the ratio would be of certified deafblind interpreters to Auslan interpreters?

Mr McAtamney: There is currently no certification for a deafblind speciality, and that speaks to part of the problem. I am an Auslan interpreter by training myself. That is my background, so I am speaking to my own experience here as well. It is very much conceptualised within the industry as an area of specialisation, along with, say, legal interpreting, mental health interpreting, things of that nature.

However, that is not the way it is generally recommended to be taught. Certainly, there is advice from the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters which recommends that this be taught as a normal and expected part of what you may encounter in a signing community. I was this morning appearing before the royal commission with a deafblind gentleman and he said that, in his estimation, around about five per cent of the interpreting services that he engages, he feels, are appropriately skilled people.

THE CHAIR: Right. So there is no certification to be a deafblind interpreter. You describe it as more of a specialisation. What is that process that someone would go through whereby they would be considered to be specialised enough by their peers?

Mr McAtamney: Generally, it is a lot of on-the-job learning. That can come through working in a voluntary capacity. Because it is so hard to get large amounts of support together any time there is a deafblind conference or a meeting of a lot of deafblind people coming together, there is a reliance on volunteer labour to support that. Often those volunteers are drawn from Auslan courses or they are people who are studying to become interpreters. So there is some learning that takes place there. There is a lot of on-the-job learning, where you are paired up with a tandem interpreter who is perhaps more experienced and who is willing to share that knowledge with you.

And then there are some post-accreditation professional development opportunities out there for people, which technically take the form of half-day to one-day workshops. But those tend to be more about the deafblind awareness aspect of things, as opposed to really drilling down to the nitty-gritty of the craft and practice of interpreting and how that needs to be modified in a deafblind context.

THE CHAIR: Very useful; thank you.

MS LAWDER: In your submission you talk about Auslan interpreters in the media, for example. Over the past few years, with various dramas, I think they have really come to the fore in our media conferences and on the news. I am interested to know your view about the accessibility or otherwise of government websites and other government material with respect to Auslan interpreters. I guess you cannot have a deafblind interpreter on a video. But how accessible are our websites?

Mr McAtamney: Unfortunately, again, it is not great. We recently put in a submission to the royal commission about language accessibility, looking specifically at the Disability Gateway site. We did a desktop audit of sites that are linked to from the Disability Gateway. I believe we looked at 16 different sites.

These link to various private hospital and state government pages. There are different landing pages where these links end up. Of everything we looked at, the only page that had information in Auslan was the Disability gateway itself. None of the pages that we looked at, including the Disability Gateway, had the capacity to receive incoming information in Auslan.

The other area of language access which really needs to be stressed is that true and equal participation in a language environment does not just mean the ability to be a passive absorber of information; it also means your ability to contribute. It is very rarely, if ever, possible for somebody to submit information to a website in Auslan, even when information is made available in Auslan.

MS LAWDER: On that, something just occurred to me. I presume that also potentially applies to the Electoral Commission, which leads me to ask about how easy or otherwise deafblind people find it to participate in our elections.

Mr McAtamney: Again, it is very varied. The experience is almost as varied as the community because deafblindness does cover such a range. Some people find it easy to engage in the process as it stands now. Some people do not. But in terms of engagement with civic life or political processes, this is where it really comes to bear and we see the impact of that language deprivation and not having access to the patter of the town in the same way that hearing and sighted people do. Deafblind people are often functioning at a bit of a deficit when it comes to knowledge of those topics and engagement with the sort of societal debate that is happening around topics prior to an election coming up, because there is just no access to the venues or to the spaces, both online or physically, where those sorts of discussions are taking place.

MR DAVIS: At the risk of being partisan—let me find a way to make it not like that—what responsibility, then, do you think there is on political parties and political candidates to make sure that they are making themselves accessible and pitching their proverbial policy wares to Deaf and hard of hearing people and deafblind people specifically?

Mr McAtamney: From our perspective at DBA, they are 100 per cent responsible. One of the things that is so powerful about providing language access is that it not only creates an opportunity for the people that need the information in that language to have access to the information but models the power that mainstream entities or the community at large have to actually effect change.

The diagnostic reductionism that comes with the medical model of disability has mis-apportioned responsibility for barriers, for years, onto the people with disability. The presence of an impairment or a divergent way of being does not in and of itself create a barrier. That barrier is brought into existence when that person begins interacting with the environment around them.

In the same way, an “able bodied” hearing person will be completely disabled if they go to a Deaf club and do not know how to sign. The reasons that these barriers exist is equally blameable, if you want to put it that way, on the actions and decisions that are made by the “non-disabled” party. So I would say that any politician or political party worth its salt when it comes to inclusivity and accessibility absolutely has to take on the responsibility to ensure that their information is accessible to the signing community.

MR DAVIS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr McAtamney, for appearing today on behalf of Deafblind Australia. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you.

Mr McAtamney: Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone.

THE CHAIR: The committee will now suspend for a short break and reconvene at 3 pm.

Hearing suspended from 2.40 to 3.01 pm.

MURRAY, MS SHEREE, Board Director and ACT Representative, Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ASLIA)

THE CHAIR: Welcome back, everybody, to the public hearing of the Standing Committee on Education and Community Inclusion inquiry into access to services and information in Auslan. Please be aware that the proceedings today are being recorded and transcribed by Hansard and will be published. The proceedings are also being broadcast and webstreamed live.

We move on to our next witness appearing today, Ms Murray, on behalf of the Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your submission. I draw your attention to the privilege statement that was provided to you. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

Ms Murray: Yes, I understand it.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Ms Murray: Thank you; I would. I have, for the very first part of my opening statement, a statement from an Auslan student, Katy Wilmington, who is a current third year Auslan student. She says:

> As an Auslan student entering my third year of a certificate IV of Auslan, we the students received notification, because the JobTrainer funding is being discontinued, we would have to go back to paying full fees for our Auslan courses. Whilst we are grateful for the opportunity to learn such a wonderfully diverse language, for most of us it is not economically possible for us to continue our studies.
>
> There are currently 13 students in our class and others in the community wanting to continue into certificate IV, which alone is $3,500 per student, and I am sure you can understand what stress this is causing. Previously Auslan was provided in Canberra through CIT and had VET supported places. Our current only option for training in Auslan and to the level of diploma of interpreting in Australia is through Deaf Connect.
>
> The costings of our course from the beginning the Auslan I course through to the diploma of interpreting of Auslan is $20,540. In comparison to other states, South Australia is $5,845, Queensland $6,390 and New South Wales $9,820. I believe this massive economic hindrance is a large part of the reason why we do not have enough qualified interpreters available for the Deaf community both locally and Australia wide.

Speaking on behalf of ASLIA, access to information in Auslan, access to Auslan in the community, relies on Auslan training being available and training for interpreters being available. This training needs to be ongoing, it needs to be of quality and it needs to be affordable. We need support for interpreters to access mentoring, and upskilling opportunities for current interpreters, to ensure that we have successive higher qualified interpreters. As we can even see today in this room, we have had to acquire interpreters from outside of the ACT to be able to meet this commitment. Currently, we only have one fully certified interpreter in the ACT.

There is also a need to recognise the skills that are required within the education system for the interpreters there and that those people who are working as interpreters are appropriately remunerated. We also need to consider the retention of skilled interpreters. There are interpreters that leave the profession due to burnout and also due to the instability of the work. The work can be very fluctuating. Most of the work is casualised, so interpreters do not have access to sick leave and other entitlements like that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will lead off the questions and we will make our way through the other committee members. I have one quick follow-up on your opening statement. You ran through the cost comparisons of the different jurisdictions to acquire a diploma. What is causing the ACT to be so much more expensive?

Ms Murray: I believe that is the withdrawal of the JobTrainer funding. I believe that in other states the courses are subsidised.

THE CHAIR: That is good to know. In regard to ACT government announcements, and in particular throughout COVID-19, could you tell the committee how the Deaf community stepped up in that time to provide appropriate information to the Deaf community?

Ms Murray: Do you mean through the most recent times, from when we had our lockdown last year, or are you talking about the entire pandemic response?

THE CHAIR: Well, either/or; most notably, probably through the lockdown with the daily press conferences.

Ms Murray: For the daily press conferences that occurred here in the ACT, initially there was the ability to provide remote streaming from outside of the ACT to access higher qualified interpreters, but those interpreters lack that local knowledge of where places are and things like that which enhance a person's ability to interpret that information. So the Deaf community advocated for certified provisional interpreters to be engaged, working closely with our one certified interpreter for that time. Through that process there were mentoring and debriefing opportunities with the agency that was engaged to provide those interpreters.

THE CHAIR: Does the ACT have the workforce to genuinely and in a sustainable way interpret daily press conferences?

Ms Murray: Currently, I would say not. We have nine qualified interpreters within the ACT. Doing daily press conferences is a very exhausting process. We had a team of three of us who would rotate through because we needed that time off to be able to relax, have time away from that and debrief from that process. It was a very intense process. So even if you have rotating teams, over a great length of time there are issues of burnout.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: Thank you, Ms Murray. You have mentioned CIT and vocational training in your submission. It has been mentioned a lot today. You have been around the traps for a while. I wonder if you could talk to the committee about what it used to look like. The committee has heard a lot today about how CIT once did this thing and it was great and it was meeting demand. That is what we have been led to believe in conversation. Then, for reasons that are unclear, it stopped providing these courses and now we are at the point where we have this gross shortage. What was it like when CIT was providing these courses?

Ms Murray: I can answer that. I was privileged enough to be studying through CIT to gain my qualifications. I believe that it started to stop because there was a perceived lack of numbers and CIT, I feel, were unwilling to continue to provide these courses.

For me, when I did the diploma of interpreting it was delayed by three months and we were told it was not going to run because there were not enough students. We only had, I think, five students that wanted to enrol in that course. We wrote to the government and lobbied for them to provide this course so that we could get more trained interpreters on the ground. That happened, but there was a three-month delay to the course.

It started in April. Of the six students. I believe five passed the exams. Four chose to work as interpreters. Currently, only three are continuing as interpreters in the ACT today, from that time. The diploma of interpreting was not actually offered in the ACT until, I think it was last year or the year before, it was provided through Deaf Services. From that, now we have two very fresh, newly qualified interpreters.

The course, in those days, was taught so that each certificate was over a 12-month period, two nights a week, coming together face to face. The current course, as it is provided, is a combination of face-to-face plus online learning and it is in a six-month time frame, which leaves less time to really get those fluent language skills and less time to spend those hours practising the language.

MR DAVIS: You have to forgive me; I am putting all the pieces together. So CIT were not providing a course. They now are, but that is—

Ms Murray: They are no longer providing the course. I believe 2015 was the last time CIT provided training.

MR DAVIS: So this course that you have mentioned here, this is a different—

Ms Murray: This is the private provider: Deaf Services.

MR DAVIS: So this is the $20,000 one?

Ms Murray: Yes.

MR DAVIS: That makes sense. We get the impression that it is a pretty tight-knit community; everybody knows everybody. Would you have a rough estimate—I will not hold you to a figure—for this committee of how many people might be interested in taking an intro to Auslan course, were CIT to provide one in the next school year?

Ms Murray: Are you talking about the first certificate courses or talking about the—

MR DAVIS: I suppose you have got to start somewhere.

Ms Murray: There are community-based courses which are six or eight-week introduction courses. Those are currently provided by Deaf Services and also by CIT Solutions. They cannot provide enough courses. There is so much demand for them that there is a long waiting list. In terms of then going on to certificate courses, certificate II is your starting course in a certificate of Auslan. I believe there is substantial interest from those people that have finished those basic courses to go on to do the certificate II. I believe you are getting at least 20 to 30 people wanting to enrol in those courses each year.

MR DAVIS: And while, in a perfect world, the committee would probably want to recommend to government that they should expand the intro to Auslan course to meet the demand and make sure that there are these greater qualification courses made available for qualified interpreters, were we to make a recommendation to the government to prioritise one of the two, what would you suggest?

Ms Murray: I would probably prioritise the certificate courses because that is where you are getting the fluency in Auslan to then have the fluency that can be used every day in communicating with Deaf people. The introductory courses just give a very basic starting point. To get any sort of fluency you need to have at least completed certificate II to be able to start a conversation, and probably a diploma of Auslan to have any real fluency in the language.

MR DAVIS: Are CIT aware of this community demand? I struggle to think that this would be first time they would be hearing about it, through this committee. I suspect they know.

Ms Murray: I am unaware of what they know or do not know.

MR DAVIS: Has your organisation made representations to CIT or their leadership to advocate for the reinstatement of the certificate courses?

Ms Murray: No, we have not.

MS LAWDER: Just to follow up on that, my understanding would be that the six to eight-week CIT Solutions course would be like a jewellery-making course or a sponge cake cooking course.

Ms Murray Yes, one of those recreational courses.

MS LAWDER: A recreational one, yes, and there is not a qualification.

Ms Murray: No.

MS LAWDER: I think Mr Davis would find that back 2015, in budget discussions, there was a lot of debate about the abolition of the course.

MR DAVIS: A bit before my time, Ms Lawder.

MS LAWDER: I might have had a few things to say about it back then.

MR DAVIS: I suspect.

MS LAWDER: Back to your submission. There is quite a bit about the educational side of things, but I am also very interested in the mental health professional qualifications. Do you have to be a level 3 interpreter or any particular level to become a mental health professional interpreter?

Ms Murray: It is ASLIA's position that only certified interpreters should be undertaking this work—and only certified interpreters that have had additional training in mental health and how to work in that space. However, the reality is that we do not have enough of those interpreters. Often interpreters that might not even have a certified interpreter qualification can see that there is a gap and, maybe knowing the Deaf client and their needs and knowing that they can meet their needs in that area, may accept that work. But it would be best if it was left to those with the right skills and qualifications.

MS LAWDER: Would it be that they might accept it because there is no-one else available? They try and do the right thing, in a way?

Ms Murray: Yes. That is correct.

MS LAWDER: Yes.

Ms Murray: And sometimes it is about providing access or the Deaf person going completely without because there is no possibility for access otherwise.

MS LAWDER: We heard a bit today from someone—I am afraid I do not recall who—that sometimes family members interpret, especially in health situations. From a professional interpreting perspective, could you explain, for the benefit of the committee, what the perils of having family members act as interpreters, not only in health but especially in health, might be?

Ms Murray: Yes. Obviously, family members have a vested interest. They have an agenda, and they are not held to the code of ethics, as professional interpreters are. As professional interpreters we hold to the code of ethics that we will interpret everything faithfully, meaning for meaning, in any of these contexts.

There are instances where children may have interpreted for parents and there are concepts that they just do not understand because of their age. There are instances where families have chosen not to pass on information to family members because they have deemed it not important or they do not want them to know or they might be trying to influence a sort of outcome.

MS LAWDER: So they may not pass on a big one: "You are going to die in six months," or something like that.

Ms Murray: Yes. Or they might, I suppose, alter the meaning.

MS LAWDER: Yes.

Ms Murray: Or soften it.

MS LAWDER: Would someone usually take a family member as an interpreter if they were unable to find a qualified interpreter?

Ms Murray: That has happened. There are some Deaf people that have begged a friend who has some basic skills in Auslan to come with them because they feel there is no guarantee of being able to get an interpreter or even being able to advocate for the health service to provide an interpreter.

MS LAWDER: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: In your submission you talk about some of the issues that arise as an interpreter in the course of employment. What could be done to make being an interpreter a better career choice?

Ms Murray: I believe there should some protections around being a highly casualised workforce: guarantees for super provisions, guarantees for provision for sick leave. I believe that is happening now in Victoria for disability support workers, who also suffer that same casualised issue, as we do, that if we are sick and we do not go to work then we do not get paid. If we are trying to pay off our mortgage and do all those things everyone else is doing, we might be then endangering our community because: “I am just going to work through being sick because I still need to pay my mortgage.”

THE CHAIR: A very fair consideration. Is there an issue experienced in a casualised workforce from not having a guaranteed number of hours in a given week and trying to plan your finances?

Ms Murray: I believe so. Definitely, if we look at the Canberra interpreters that are currently available, most of them have another job because they cannot guarantee the hours of interpreting. There are some weeks where there are well more hours than interpreters available. I know that this week there are many Deaf people who will not get access to interpreters because there are not enough. But then there are other weeks when that work is not available. That is why a lot of interpreters are working other jobs, to have some steady, ongoing income.

MR DAVIS: We heard from Legal Aid before. They were discussing the need for interpreter services at the courthouse. I put it to them: did they believe that there would be sufficient demand at the courthouse for a permanent, ongoing interpreter, who was staffed at the courthouse? They said, yes, absolutely.

Going a bit bigger than that, do you think there would be appetite amongst the interpreters we have currently to work full time for the ACT government, with full pay and conditions, as an ACT government public servant, to be deployed to areas of the government and the public service as required, but to have that job security and stability?

Ms Murray: I believe there would be appetite for that. I would, however, have great concerns for access for the Deaf community in other areas that, if we take one of the available interpreters away, then they do not have access to be able to pull those interpreters into their doctors' appointments, into their social events appointments or into education.

MR DAVIS: That makes sense. So we circle back to the wicked problem of not enough interpreters.

Ms Murray: Yes.

THE CHAIR: On that note, we are out of time. On behalf of the committee, thank you, Ms Murray, for being here today. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you.

Ms Murray: Thank you.

BEAVER, MS SHERRIE, ILC Project Lead, Expression Australia

Evidence was given via an Auslan interpreter—

THE CHAIR: We move to the next witness appearing today, Ms Beaver, on behalf of Expression Australia. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded to you by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement provided to you. Can you confirm for the record that you understand?

Ms Beaver: Read and accepted.

THE CHAIR: Perfect. Before we proceed to questions from the committee, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Ms Beaver: Yes, I would, and I will keep it brief. Expression Australia are one of the national leads in service provision. We provide interpreting services. We also create Auslan resources. At Expression Australia we have seen the impact that the Auslan interpreting shortage has had and how it has affected our community. This is one of the main issues that is driving our work. We want to ensure that Deaf and hard of hearing people have equal access to services and information in the language of their choice, which is Auslan. So it basically means that they have full access. When they have access, they can make informed decisions in all aspects of their life.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will lead off with questions and then we will make our way through the committee. In your submission you recommend that interpreters be used at government and emergency-related press conferences. Throughout COVID-19 the entire community has seen interpreters at the emergency COVID press conferences. Would you like to see interpreters at an even wider array of government press conferences?

Ms Beaver: Absolutely. At Expression Australia we provide interpreters. We have done throughout the pandemic in Victoria and in Tasmania. Through COVID we have seen an increase in the demand. In emergency services in the past, there have been bushfires and floods, and we have an agreement with the emergency services in Victoria under which we will provide interpreting access for any emergency announcement and for any general community updates as well.

What we have seen in the past is a lot of government announcements, whether they be announcements in relation to education, health services and so on, and an interpreter is not provided in those settings. So how can a Deaf person possibly access or have any information as to what is happening with community events or initiatives? If the Deaf person is not afforded the opportunity of seeing an Auslan interpreter on their screen then they do not have full and equal access to that information. It is about not only emergency announcements; it is about having access to all incidental information, or all information, equal to their peers and equal to that of the hearing community. Without access to information, a Deaf person is unable to make an informed decision.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: I am interested in talking about recommendation 6, where you suggest that audits be undertaken to appreciate the extent to which existing material available in English is also available in Auslan. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that a little more. In particular, do you think that government directorates are best placed to audit their own materials or do you think an external organisation should be brought in to do that audit? If so, would you have any recommendations of suitably qualified organisations for the government to consider?

Ms Beaver: I am happy to expand on that. Doing an audit is about working with the local government areas and ascertaining which resources are provided in Auslan already. Often information is provided in Auslan, through the use of interpreters or interpreted videos.

I can give you one quick example. For British Sign Language, BSL, there is a national plan available in Scotland. Their national plan states that all government departments are responsible for auditing and keeping a record and reporting against all of the information that is provided, and ensuring that it is provided in BSL as well. It is a fantastic model, readily available overseas. I think it is something that could be implemented here.

In the ACT you guys have a great opportunity to provide such a model here, in your state. All departments should take responsibility for auditing their own information, very similar to the Department of Social Services, for example. They are responsible for ensuring that everyone has access to information so that everyone can live a full life, regardless of their abilities, whether they be Deaf or hearing.

MR DAVIS: As someone who is not a minister, what I hear from ministers or the government a lot is that we do not have the available workforce to meet a pretty ambitious social policy agenda. So, in terms of audits being conducted by current staff, I foreshadow some resistance. Would you see some benefit in engaging as a consultant, for example, an organisation like yours, or a similar organisation, to do that audit and then the government departments become responsible for maintaining those materials and services and supports if there are workforce shortages or pressures?

Ms Beaver: I think so. A few things could happen. We could create job opportunities for Deaf people within this space, because there are plenty of Deaf people with the skill set to be able to work in a position like that, to act as a consultant, using not only their expertise in the language but their lived experience as well. That way we are working on a co-design model, a process of co-design, not only for the Deaf community but with the Deaf community. As I have said in my submission, it is nothing about us without us. So I think using that concept is really important to ensure that Deaf people at all levels are included in the decision-making process.

Really, it is important to work with Deaf people or Deaf organisations, like DeafACT, incorporating an organisation like that in any decision-making process. There are organisations like Deaf Connect, Expression Australia and Deaf Australia. There are a number of organisations that could be consulted on these matters.

MR DAVIS: That is perfect. Thank you.

MS LAWDER: Just following on from that, talking about an audit of government websites et cetera and accessibility, I note you identified a few of the relevant articles in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. One that you have not specifically mentioned but that I want to ask you about is, from memory, article 29, about participation in political and public life. With reference to that, I wonder whether you have any views about the accessibility of parliaments and parliamentary information, and even elections. How do you feel about the accessibility of that political sphere?

Ms Beaver: Great question. I will give you a good example in Victoria. In Victoria they have a parliament, obviously. They are good at involving the Deaf community. Usually, they have the parliamentary bulletin, which is made available in Auslan. Every month there are announcements that are in that bulletin as to what happens within parliament.

There is a Deaf person who is brought in to work as an interpreter in that instance. In the past what has happened is that, when there are parliamentary sittings, a Deaf youth member has been brought in to work in parliament to ensure that parliamentary issues are made fully accessible to the Deaf community. They are working very, very closely with members of the Deaf community to generate a vocab list in Auslan so that all of the government vocabulary is made accessible to Deaf people.

That is just one example of how you can work with members of the Deaf community. This is the youth parliamentarian member. This has been happening for a little while now. It is a very, very accessible service. It is about including Deaf members in the team. And this is what the ACT parliament could look like. Deaf youth members can run their own parliament. I think it is really, really popular.

Generally speaking, the Deaf community have a low level of civic education, which means that the Deaf community often absorb politics or parliamentary information but they do not have a full understanding of what that means. They therefore do not have a lot of confidence when it comes to voting or engaging in political discussion, or they are not very confident in talking about what they want to see happen in their LGA. This happens time and again. It is about other members of the Deaf community talking to those less confident Deaf community members about what is happening politically and how to better unpack those concepts.

MR DAVIS: I have a supplementary on that, if you do not mind? It goes to something Ms Lawder was talking about before in terms of the difference between closed captioning and having an Auslan interpreter in the chamber. Take it from me: if you read what I said on closed captioning and then you saw it interpreted in Auslan, you might get two different impressions in the chamber. Could you elaborate a little more on how that might help with that civic participation and why that is so important, as a difference from just having closed captioning?

Ms Beaver: That is a very good question, again. Captions are great for those members who have strong English fluency. For many Deaf people, English is not our first language. So when English is brought up on screen, not only is it very dense; on top of that, you couple it with this very political language. There is a lot of vocab that Deaf people are just not familiar with. Let alone seeing it in Auslan, they are seeing it in its written form, which can be very difficult to digest. A lot of Deaf people rely on their friends and family, and by the time all of this information is then relayed back to them they are well behind in the conversation. It is just another disadvantage and another barrier.

On top of that, what happens when access to technology fails—if the captions break down or if the captions are not transcribed correctly and there are spelling mistakes or issues? If you have an interpreter on screen, it provides much greater ease in communication, especially when you are talking about a topic that is already dense, like political information. I think it is much easier to provide that to a Deaf person in their native language, rather than have them rely on English, which is their second language. It is easier to digest. If they can get it in their first language then essentially they will have a better ability to participate in political conversations.

MR DAVIS: Thank you.

MS LAWDER: You have also talked in your submission about the disadvantage and discrimination faced by Deaf and hard of hearing people, and the utilisation of the medical model of disability, rather than a social model. We have heard a range of views today, especially from hearing parents of Deaf children, and some teachers of the Deaf. Where do you think the disadvantage and discrimination is the strongest? Is it in education, for example? If we had to hit one area first and hit it hard, what area should we be trying to improve in the first instance?

Ms Beaver: Health; I think the health system. When a baby is first born and diagnosed as having deafness, the parents panic because, usually for the parent, this is the first Deaf person that they have encountered. And it is their child. Emotions are all a blur anyway. The medical professionals in the hospital setting focus on the ear and the ear alone, because it is a medical model. The first words they are hearing are, "Okay. Let's rectify this deafness," or "They have a hearing loss, so how do we fix this?" Words like this come up. Then they are spoken to about the need for cochlear implants or assistive technologies. It is a very, very heavily medical model. There is no access to a cultural and linguistic model, no access to information about the Deaf community. That can have a detrimental effect on the person, the parent.

The first seven years of a child's life are critical. We know that. Access to information, language acquisition, is incredibly important within those first seven years of life. If a child does not have access to information or to language, whether it be spoken or signed, it can have a huge negative impact on them. So it is not only about the parent; it is about the child being provided with an entire array of information. That, in turn, can lessen the fact of language deprivation.

Communication itself starts in the home. It is not about this child attending sessions. It is about engaging with their own family members and creating a foundation language. That all happens in the home. If you have a strong foundation language then they have a better chance of thriving in the school environment. Yes, they may go to school, but they need that foundation language first. It is really critical. Some of the other witnesses have already spoken about the education system. It is really hard to navigate. I think parents need to be provided with better information from the get-go.

MS LAWDER: Thank you. You mentioned health. What about the rest of the health system, especially hospitals? What about interpreter access in hospitals, in mental health and that type of thing?

Ms Beaver: Yes; the entire system. Regarding interpreter access within the hospital system, most of the time when a Deaf person presents to the emergency room and they say, "Look, I need an interpreter," the hospital staff members are all in a flurry because they do not know what to do. Or they push them back because they do not know how to find an interpreter; they do not know where the interpreter booking information is. Most of the staff have not received any formal training in how to book an interpreter, so they do not know what to do.

So a Deaf person presents and immediately they are encountered with the very first barrier that they are to face within that health setting. They are calling in interpreters. It is giving Deaf people an added amount of stress, because often they are told to book their own interpreter or to bring their own interpreter when they are dealing with their own medical emergency at the same time. In addition to that, there is a shortage of Auslan interpreters, so it is not easy just to grab one and bring one in. Not all interpreters are fluent enough or skilled enough to be able to work in a medical setting.

At Expression Australia we have the Deaf Regional Health Project, where we are looking at access to hospitals for Deaf and hard of hearing people. This is within Victoria and Tasmania. We have a project to liaise with the hospitals to ensure that they are better equipped at providing interpreters or dealing with Deaf patients, should they present to the hospital service. It is an issue that we see not only here but around Australia as well. The hospital system is huge. All of the hospitals are immense. There is a vast array of staff members. It would be impossible to access every single staff member within the hospital. Unfortunately, members of our Deaf community are falling between the cracks. So the project that we have at Expression Australia could be a model that we see rolled out nationally.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. We are slightly over time, but I have one last quick question. In your submission you point out that the Australian Capital Territory does not recognise Auslan as a linguistic right. What are the benefits of recognising it?

Ms Beaver: One of the benefits would be that Auslan would have some type of legal protection, legislative protection. In Australia Auslan does not have any legal recognition. There is no legal protection. We all know that. That is not new. We do not have an official language here in Australia.

If Auslan became one of the official languages, we would of course need to acknowledge all of the Indigenous languages as well. It is not an easy process. But here in Canberra, if we have something added in to one of the acts, recognition of Auslan within one of the acts, we would be afforded with some type of legal protection. Deaf people here, within the ACT, would have a greater right to access to information in their first language, which would be Auslan.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. On behalf of the committee, thank you, Ms Beaver, for appearing today on behalf of Expression Australia. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you.

Ms Beaver: Thank you for the opportunity.

PHILLIPS, MR BRENT, Chief Impact Officer, Deaf Connect

Evidence was given via an Auslan interpreter—

THE CHAIR: We move to the next witness appearing today, Mr Brent Phillips, on behalf of Deaf Connect. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement provided to you. Can you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of that statement?

Mr Phillips: I do.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions from the committee, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Mr Phillips: I would; thank you. First of all, I would like to acknowledge the ACT government's commitment to looking into the extremely critical issue that we face as Deaf and hard of hearing people who live in the ACT. It just so happens that I am in Melbourne, watching day two of the disability royal commission hearings. Over the last couple of days, Deaf experts and representatives from advocacy services and service providers have been giving witness advice recommending Auslan as a language, talking about early intervention and the importance of language recognition in providing access to different domains in life, whether it is justice, employment, education, socially and so on. So it is very topical.

It is pleasing to see the different levels of government across Australia now looking into this issue quite seriously, particularly the ACT government. I am looking forward to representing Deaf Connect and sharing some of our learnings and recommendations for improving the lives of Deaf and hard of hearing people within the ACT who are Auslan users. It is extremely critical that they are provided access to quality communication and language access in order to be able to thrive in schools, in their workplaces, and even within their own family home. Social and community participation is extremely important. I am looking forward to responding to the questions that you have for me today.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Thank you. I will lead off with the questions and then we will work our way through the committee members. In your submission you recommended establishing an Auslan task force within the ACT government to co-design a territory-wide Auslan strategy. Why should we do that?

Mr Phillips: We did. The establishment of a task force would ensure a coordinated, cohesive approach for the better provision of Auslan services and Auslan support, as well as opportunities for training and learning. We have observed the government approach at different levels. It is very fragmented and ad hoc in terms of the approach to the provision of Auslan through funded programs, services and initiatives. There is no joining up.

If the ACT government were to establish a task force as such, or an advisory group, whatever it looks like, with the remit of designing what would be optimal access for Auslan users who are deaf and hard of hearing in the ACT, it would have to consider a very broad scope, from access to quality workforce. We do not have enough interpreters or teachers or translators, for that matter, as well as support workers. And that has flow-on impacts, going ahead.

The task force would look at the whole approach, not just committing to providing access but also considering the pipeline and where the workforce is coming from. It also would take into consideration the input of Deaf and hard of hearing people who live in the ACT, who live and breathe the day-to-day barriers and the struggles that they face in order to obtain services and information of high quality.

Our recommendation comes from a place where we would like to have a joint approach, rather than one department deciding on doing one initiative, while another department decides on a completely different initiative. It would be a coordinated approach, a holistic strategy and approach to the viability and sustainability of access to Auslan for ACT residents for the long term. On top of that, the most important thing would be to involve Deaf people in the process.

THE CHAIR: That is great. Can you point to any jurisdictions that have undertaken this line of work previously that we could potentially emulate?

Mr Phillips: Unfortunately, I can’t. It has not been done. So you could be the first. You could be the trailblazers in this space. In a few submissions that we have put forward to the New South Wales government, to the federal government and so on, we have really started to push this idea. Deaf Connect have been working closely with Deaf Australia to look into our “asks” of the federal government. Our number one ask is for the federal government to establish a task force to develop a national Auslan strategy. That covers all the points I mentioned earlier, in terms of access to information and services, quality training and pathways for the workforce.

So far, no government has taken that on. There have been a couple of examples, such as in Victoria, where there has been the establishment of a state-wide strategy. It is a very specific strategy for Victorian people to get the necessary supports and services, and also looking into the future at their workforce and the supply chain. I strongly recommend that the ACT be the first to establish this sort of task force for the Deaf community and hard of hearing community, moving forward.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful.

MR DAVIS: Thank you, Mr Phillips, and thank you for your very detailed submission. You have to forgive me for being the ice cube in the hot tea. I am a new member. I have been here for two years. I have seen already a fair few task forces that were glorified morning teas. Would you have any advice, first of all, on what you would prioritise the ACT government to do as an immediate intervention when it comes to Auslan and access to interpreter services? What advice might you give the ACT government on how an Auslan task force should be established and what kinds of protections we should put around such a task force to ensure that its recommendations are enacted and so that we do not do a lot of important co-design conversations for a report to sit on a shelf?

Mr Phillips: Great question. I will go to your first question around what it is that you can do immediately. The first thing I would say is to look into your subsidy program for Auslan training within the ACT. The different state and territory governments have different levels of subsidy programs for those who would like to enter cert II, III, IV or the diploma of Auslan. As well, the diploma of Auslan widely varies across the board.

Our experience as an ISO, as Deaf Connect, is that the ACT government subsidy has been very ad hoc. There are caps on the number of places at cert II level and then people have to pay full fees for certificate III and moving on, if they would like to progress through to the diploma. It is certainly the view of interpreters that we should be able to have free pathways, fully subsidised. So that is one big thing that could be done. You could look into that, and uncapping the number of funded places for those who would like to learn the language and then perhaps become interpreters or support workers or teachers. That is something that could be done relatively quickly.

There are budgetary impacts, of course, but the trade-off, the cost of not doing so and not exploring that or not committing to it, is greater than the actual cost of undertaking that pathway. People do not have access to interpreting with the police, schools, hospitals and workplaces. That trade-off really shows that it would be a great investment and something that, like I said, could be done relatively quickly. My apologies; can you just go through the second question?

MR DAVIS: Should this committee, which is made up of members that do not form the executive, recommend to government that they establish a task force like the one that you have described, what protections should we put in place to make sure that the recommendations of the task force are enacted and, as I said before, it is not just a report that sits on a shelf—it is not just released by a minister to say that we have been listening but that we can actually deliver on some of the outcomes?

Mr Phillips: I would say that, without pre-empting the outcome of what the task force would entail and the work that is undertaken, some things could be legislated. There could be mandatory provision of specific services and access requirements. Elevate the position and the status of Auslan as a key language in the ACT. That would, in turn, relate to embedding in your policy best practice around the provision of interpreting, whether it be in government or other domains. I absolutely understand your point about a fantastic report that takes a year of consultation and then gathers dust on the shelf in your office. There are a few things that you can embed in policy, in terms of best practice, and in legislation as well, which will ensure that it does not gather dust.

MR DAVIS: That is a great answer. Thank you very much.

MS LAWDER: In your submission you have talked about how Deaf Connect provides a wide range of whole-of-life services to support the community, including aged-care support. We have spoken about aged care a couple of times today, in different ways. Can you talk a little bit about what supports you provide to the community with respect to aged care?

Mr Phillips: Absolutely. Aged care is a critical base that we are looking at. We are the only registered aged-care provider in Australia who are deaf-specific. There are other providers who have deafness on board; they are offering services. But we have a dedicated offering where people are fluent in Auslan.

We are a registered federal provider, so we can provide all aged-care supports, within the ACT as well. The challenge that we are finding is people to actually staff those roles. Again, it goes back to the workforce having Auslan skills, particularly in areas within the ACT. We are having challenges finding high quality aged-care supports for those in the ACT. Whether it is in-home, one on one or in the community, it really is dependent on the level of the package the individual has with regard to the aged-care program.

MS LAWDER: And have you heard any calls for a Deaf specific aged-care facility?

Mr Phillips: Yes. Again, great question. Deaf Connect has just completed a national roadshow, where the CEO, other colleagues and I visited 13 different locations across Australia to meet with the community and get their feedback about what the key service gaps are in the areas, and to get some community engagement on initiatives. Some of the feedback that we heard specifically from the elderly, over 65, was, firstly, that they are not eligible for the NDIS—that they have completely fallen through the cracks in terms of the aged-care system and the NDIS system. It is a huge struggle to obtain the necessary technology or support when they are not yet eligible for the aged-care system.

The second was the lack of dedicated aged-care facilities for Deaf people specifically, across Australia, staffed by Deaf or Auslan users. There are some aged-care facilities around that have a couple of Deaf residents. But a huge concern for Deaf people is, when they get older and no longer can look after themselves at home, where could they go to find cultural and linguistic support, where they feel at home. There is no such facility across Australia. Deaf Connect is considering long and hard how to make it something that is a reality for those who are elderly, especially those who are not old yet but are starting to consider the next 20 or 30 years of their lives—that is, where can they go, once they have to leave their family home, to get end of life support but to also socialise with people on a day-to-day basis in their first language. It is a huge gap; absolutely.

MS LAWDER: Okay. Thanks.

THE CHAIR: How do we make interpreting, as a line of work, a more attractive career choice?

Mr Phillips: It is funny; that is actually something that has been raised in the last hour at the disability royal commission. There was a panel of Auslan trainers and experts who talked about that particular thing. There is a bubble; there are interested, enthusiastic people who are coming in to learn Auslan at entry level, specifically because of COVID and the interpreters on TV, and pursuing that as a potential career pathway.

There are a lot of Auslan classes across the country that are being supplied by many different providers, and the classes are full. We talked today at the DRC around how can that be leveraged, that high level of interest, to retain these people in the Auslan pathways? The first thing is that there are natural attrition rates, where people start out eager but then they pull out, for multiple reasons. There may be an extra 20 or 30 people who become interpreters at the end of every year, in the whole of Australia, and it really is not sustainable to keep up with the demand for interpreters.

We talked about investment in professional development, in particular bridging the gap between what we refer to as level 2 and level 3 interpreters. Certified provisional interpreters are level 2 and certified interpreters are level 3. The CPI, certified provisional interpreters, are limited in terms of where and what they can interpret. But the majority of interpreters are at that level. They are not suitable for hearings such as today or the disability royal commission, or for complex mental health situations and so on. So we should seriously be investing in upskilling that cohort of CPI interpreters to get them up to the certified interpreter level.

At the same time, we could be looking at how we can retain the large number of people who are enthusiastic about learning Auslan now and create space for them to immerse themselves in the Deaf community and the language. That is what is currently missing. As we are living a post-COVID environment, where is the space for people like that who are interested in learning Auslan and need to be exposed to the language? We have seen a reduction in the number of Deaf centres and Deaf clubs in the physical nature and traditional sense. People are not being exposed in that way that they traditionally were.

Something that Deaf Connect will be considering, as I am sure many others are, is looking for an appropriate space where people can immerse themselves. We are thinking about how to increase the number of interpreters, keep them engaged and keep their interest levels high to create opportunities for them to participate, but, at the same time, looking at our current interpreter industry and how to upskill our CPI interpreters. We currently have the specialised streams of medical interpreting and conference interpreting, so that provides interpreters with the opportunity to really focus on areas that interest them the most. We are seeing issues in the interpreting industry in that sense.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. On that note, we are out of time. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you, Mr Phillips, for appearing today on behalf of Deaf Connect. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription. Thank you once again.

Mr Phillips: Thank you so much. It has been an absolute pleasure to be here. I am looking forward to keeping an eye on this space and supporting any outcomes that come out of it for Deaf and hard of hearing people in the ACT. Thank you.

WRIGHT, MR TODD, Director of Business Development, Convo Australia

Evidence was given via an Auslan interpreter—

THE CHAIR: We move to the last witness appearing today, Mr Wright, on behalf of Convo Australia. On behalf of the committee, thank you for appearing today and for your written submission to the inquiry. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement provided to you. Could you confirm for the record that you understand the privilege implications of the statement.

Mr Wright: Yes, I do.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. Before we proceed to questions, Mr Wright, would you like to make a brief opening statement?

Mr Wright: Yes, please. I will just make a personal acknowledgement of the land that we are on, the Ngunnawal people of this nation. I want to recognise their continuing culture and role as custodians of the land.

Convo Australia was established quite recently, as of 14 months ago. It is an interpreting service. It is an on-demand service, and it is 24/7 operational. We provide that through an app, and we are the only on-demand interpreting service provider in Australia. We have recently become a 24/7 operation, so that means that at any time a Deaf person can have access to an interpreter.

The reason we established this service was that I had my own personal frustrations with the interpreting industry established in Australia. It was not the interpreters at fault here; it was an issue with the system. There is no fair distribution of finite resources and equitable access to interpreters. The booking services do not always suit the needs of a Deaf person. There are a lot of fee constraints—for example, a minimum of two hours when you may only need the interpreter for 10 or 15 minutes.

Having it on demand means that that we do not need to schedule ourselves so much in advance. We do not have to worry about having that additional demand of booking an interpreter. We have what is called Deaf anxiety, which impacts us on a personal level. So having a 24-hour service, this on-demand service, available for any situation is great, especially for a phone conversation.

What happens is that the government funds a service at the moment called the Video Relay Service, however that is not operational 24/7. Only the NRS (National Relay Service) which is a text based relay service is operational 24/7. So it is not easy for people to get a call. So, a lot of times, Deaf people are now receiving phone calls for the first time through Convo Australia.

We have established tens of thousands of connections since the inception of Convo Australia. We have provided access to interpreters for telephone conversations and in-person conversations covering a wide variety of situations through our app and our team of interpreters: health and wellbeing; mental health, social and emotional wellbeing; banks and financial services; government services including Medicare and Centrelink; meetings; workplace training; work meetings; legal services; religious activities; emergency services; emergency department presentation; 000 calls; calls to family, friends and neighbours; and community events and activities. There is access to all of these things now through Convo Australia.

What we did not include in the submission—we spoke about how great the service is and how great a solution it is—is that it does come with its barriers, and there are three barriers that I want to bring to your attention. What we can see from our service is what you could say are the haves and the have nots. We can see the disparity here within the Deaf community.

For those who have the National Disability Insurance Scheme, this is fine for them, but those who are over 65, as Brent Phillips just mentioned, do not have access to the NDIS. Many of those people want to access our service at Convo Australia, but the funding needs to come through an NDIS package and they are not NDIS funded; therefore, they are not eligible. If somebody is a New Zealand citizen living in Australia, they are not able to access our service. If they are a migrant to Australia waiting on permanent residency, again, they are not able to access interpreting services.

The other issue is the equity of interpreting through technology. Consider people living rural or remote. There are no Auslan interpreters out there. Finally, they have access to Convo Australia, but then we need to consider the reception, the NBN and the internet connectivity, for those people who are living out in those areas and not able to access the app that we provide. Also, we need to consider whether people are tech savvy or have that digital literacy to be able to utilise the technology. Deaf people may not have equal employment opportunities and may not be gainfully employed, and as a consequence may not be able to afford new smartphones, tablets and/or computers required to access new technology services. I know that I am taking up a lot of time at the moment, so I will wrap up.

The third point I wish to raise is about businesses and organisations either preventing access to interpreters or relying on the Deaf person to provide their own access to interpreters. We have had situations where a serious situation has emerged and we are able to connect, we have been able to connect. They have made the call through 000 and we have the interpreter on standby. Then, in communicating with the paramedics and the emergency staff at the emergency department, what should happen is that there is a transfer of responsibility over to the emergency department to provide access to Auslan interpreters, but instead they continue to rely on the Deaf patient providing their own access to their interpreter. This is not ideal for the Deaf patient. Our service is a good "stopgap" solution for those situations, but hospitals should continue to bear responsibility for providing appropriate interpreting for those situations.

Also, if we talk about financial services, a financial institution getting a phone call from our service will not actually accept our certified interpreters as a form of communication. They are then referred to the National Relay Service, which denies them access to an interpreter that is funded by them for an essential service such as banking. Government services, too, are denying any information or sharing information or allowing that phone call to proceed because of the interpreter being an intermediary. So those are three areas that I would like to rectify. We can be part of the solution if these three key issues can be fully resolved.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. I will lead off with questions and we will make our way through the committee. Do Deaf people tend to rely on one interpreting service or do they utilise a range of interpreting services for a particular need or availability?

Mr Wright: We strongly believe in choice and control, which aligns with the philosophy of the NDIS, making sure that we identify or provide what is needed for that Deaf person—an interpreter that they request, somebody who knows that person well and somebody who is familiar with the terminology and jargon of their particular setting. That is how interpreters and a Deaf person can work together in alliance.

What we do is provide a fantastic on-demand service, something that is booked for an emergency or as a last-minute resource. This is not something that was provided up until 14 months ago, until we established it ourselves. It was quite difficult even to get an interpreter for a five-minute discussion. It is not an efficient use of an interpreter's time to have to travel to then have a five-minute discussion. It does lead to a resourcing problem. We do not see Convo as replacing other interpreting service providers, instead we see our service complementing other interpreting service providers. There will always be the need for booked interpreters scheduled in advance for important meetings and appointments. For ad-hoc immediate interpreting requirements, our service can provide and fulfil those needs.

THE CHAIR: Do you find that people who use your subscription service still utilise other interpreting services or that, when people subscribe, they really just rely on your service, moving forward?

Mr Wright: No, they still utilise other service providers. What we do find is that some people will try and book an interpreter and it gets cancelled or something happens and we are then used as a back-up, or the interpreter does not show up, so we are then there on demand. As I mentioned, there is a term "Deaf anxiety", especially when it comes to interpreters arriving or being available. We provide them with a solution, an interpreter in their pocket.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

MR DAVIS: Mr Wright, if there is one key thing that has come out of today's hearing it is that there just are not enough interpreters.

Mr Wright: You are right.

MR DAVIS: I am interested in knowing: in your 14 months since being established, have you been able to meet the demand from people that want to access your services with interpreters? If so—without giving away your business secrets, of course—how have you managed to recruit and retain interpreters in that environment, when there is such a shortage?

Mr Wright: One issue that was raised earlier today—and I completely support the view and agree—is that interpreting as an industry, as a casualised workforce, is part of the gig economy. It is not reliable; it is not professional; there is a lack of support. It is a professional role, and interpreters generally work full time or part time but on a casual basis. However, what we have developed is a permanent, full-time or part-time, ongoing position within Convo, and we invest in their professional development. We also encourage them not to only work for us but to also work within their community and interpret for community events, as we believe it is important for interpreters to continue their relationship with their local Deaf community. As I mentioned, not everyone has access to Convo Australia and we do not always meet the demand of the Deaf community, but as the Deaf community and demand grows, we are also growing our workforce.

In terms of a benchmark internally, we aim to provide an interpreter with a less than one minute wait time, on average, over a month. I am pleased to say that we have been able to achieve that. In thirteen out of fourteen months, no-one has had to wait longer than one minute on average, and the month we missed this target, the average wait time was just over 60 seconds. There have been situations where there has been a significant demand and many interpreters are working all at the same time and we do have a queue for up to 10 or 15 minutes.

That is part of our business model. It is an unpredictable event at times, because you cannot predict the demand for interpreting at any given time, but we have a team of interpreters that can support each other as resources throughout Australia and we can provide interpreters where there are no interpreters in that particular area.

MR DAVIS: Mr Wright, I am going to make a crass socialist point, if you will forgive me. Your business model seems to me like private health care for Deaf and hard of hearing people. Do you see some challenges there, particularly for government, to ensure equity of access to interpreting services? Do you see your business model as one that is helping those who can help themselves, economically speaking of course, to access your service, to free up services otherwise, or do you find that now there is active competition between those free, equitable services and your business model and therefore Deaf and hard of hearing people with means are getting access and poorer Deaf and hard of hearing people might not be?

Mr Wright: All of our customers have a subscription. That is through the National Disability Insurance Scheme and it is paid with government funds. That is where the difference is: from block funding to, now, the individualised funding. As I mentioned earlier, and as you have just mentioned, we have the haves and the have nots.

My suggestion, going forward, is to work with the private sector and the public departments to be able to provide access without the need for an individual plan. I think that is critical and I think that is something that the ACT government can implement and that can be a model for all other states and territories. It is also about providing digital access in terms of devices in department offices et cetera, so that those who do not have it can utilise technology within the building to gain access to our service. We can support the ACT government to do that.

MR DAVIS: That makes sense. Thank you.

MS LAWDER: Obviously, you are using people, interpreters, but you are also using a technology-based platform. Do you think this is going to become more and more the way of the future for Deaf people—that we are going to go to more of these technology-based solutions?

Mr Wright: Yes. I do believe that we will always have both the technology and a physical presence. They both have a place. The challenge that we are finding is that the Deaf community are not particularly ready for the type of solution that we have. There is still a lot of perplexity from the Deaf community on how the platform works. We are part of a global company established in the USA 13 years ago. There is a long history of video relay service provision in the USA, so they are quite au fait with that approach, whereas Australia is still quite in its infancy—our video relay service was only established a few years ago.

It is still relatively new technology; we need greater exposure and familiarity with our technology and services, and we can see growing acceptance of our services from the Deaf community. We have seen growth, because a lot of people are using the services now. A measure of that is the number of hours that our services are used where some customers have used several hours of our service each month whereas others have not yet used our services. When we reach out to these customers to inquire why they have not used our services in their plan yet, they say that it provides them with peace of mind as they know our service is accessible from within their pocket; it is there ready for them to use when they need it. If they are stopped by the police, or if they encounter a barrier, they can use our service to get access to interpreting at that moment. That is the feedback we are receiving from the Deaf community.

MS LAWDER: Do you think apps like yours will make the National Relay Service obsolete?

Mr Wright: There is still a need for the National Relay Service. If you consider hard of hearing people, our app does not cater to them. We are solely focused on the Auslan-using, sign language using community. We could expand to that type of service; our app does have that flexibility. If somebody chose to use their voice to speak for themselves, they can do this through our app now, so they could speak for themselves but the response would come through in Auslan. For somebody who may lose their hearing later in life, for example, that is an option that they can use with our app, but I think there should always be options. So the National Relay Service is still an essential service.

MS LAWDER: At one point, years and years ago, the National Relay Service I think did an interpreting trial. That did not go ahead? Is that all finished?

Mr Wright: No, no, no. That is still in progression. It is now called the Video Relay Service, which is an adjunct to the National Relay Service. Please excuse me if I am wrong, but I believe it is from seven or eight in the morning till six in the evening, and that is Monday to Friday only. There is a big driving force for us to become 24/7, because our lives do not stop at 6 o'clock in the evening. We still have to make phone calls through the weekend.

That is an important service for us to have access to, so consider the frustrations, the lack of flexibility to use this service be able to talk to someone in person rather than over the phone. Consider the 000 calls that we need to make. If I need to use the Video Relay Service to make a 000 call, my connection to the interpreter ends when the phone call is done, when the ambulance turns up or when the police or the emergency services turn up. My communication is again cut off. So what we can provide is continuity of interpreting support, providing critical all-of-life service.

MS LAWDER: Fantastic. Thank you.

THE CHAIR: All right. On that note, on behalf of the committee, I would like to thank you, Mr Wright, for appearing today on behalf of Convo Australia. When available, a proof transcript will be forwarded to you to provide an opportunity to check the transcript and identify any errors in transcription.

Mr Wright: Thank you, everyone.

THE CHAIR: The hearing is now adjourned. On behalf of the committee, I would like to thank all of the witnesses who have appeared, as well as the people with the hardest job today, the interpreters. I would like to thank Amanda, David and Kelly. Today would not have been possible without you. If members wish to lodge questions on notice, please provide them to the committee secretary within five working days of the hearing. Thank you, everybody.

The committee adjourned at 4.22 pm.