

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON COMMUNITY SERVICES AND
SOCIAL EQUITY**

(Reference: budget 2002-2003—service delivery)

Members:

**MR J HARGREAVES (The Chair)
MRS H CROSS
MS R DUNDAS**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 21 MARCH 2002

**Secretary to the committee:
Ms J Henderson (Ph: 620 50129)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

The committee met at 2.10 pm.

DANIEL STUBBS

and

KAREN NICHOLSON

were called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome to today's hearing. The committee's inquiry is part of the budget consultation process, and we're looking at priorities for service delivery. The committee will examine the evidence before it and make recommendations to the Assembly. The committee does not make decisions about budget matters. It is not the committee's role or responsibility to make decisions, merely to make recommendations to the Assembly, which can then make recommendations or give directions to the government of the day. That is not this committee's role. People need to understand that we have the power of recommendation only.

These hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections but also responsibilities. It means that you're protected from certain legal action, such as being sued for defamation for what you say to us today. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell us the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter.

As you have already been advised, the hearings will be broadcast through departmental offices as well as this building, and the media, if they have the approval of the Speaker, may do it.

We thank you for your submission. I propose that we offer you the first five minutes to talk about your submission and then members will be invited to ask you questions. We ask you to state your name and the capacity in which you appear before the committee. I now invite you to make an opening statement.

Mr Stubbs : I am Daniel Stubbs, Director of the ACT Council of Social Service.

Ms Nicholson: My name is Karen Nicholson. I'm a policy officer with the council.

Mr Stubbs: You've received our submission. We would like to highlight several areas of community services and social equity. I've broken our verbal submission up into three areas. There's a range of initiatives we'd like to recommend to you around the theme of our submission, attacking poverty, but then I'd also like to go to issues around the development of a professional community sector. The third area is planning service provision by the community services sector.

The headline issue and the most important for the community sector for people living in disadvantage in the ACT is housing. An affordable housing task force been set up by this government. We don't want to pre-empt any of its claims or any of its recommendations,

and that's not our intention, but we do wish to stress to this committee that housing is becoming a more and more urgent issue in this town.

There's a need to recognise that there will be recommendations from the affordable housing task force that will require resources. I think it's worth noting that and recommending that those resources be set aside now so that we don't have to wait for a further budget period.

There is also a quite obvious need for a housing referral service so that people urgently requiring housing can get access to it and be referred accordingly, whether it be to emergency accommodation, public housing or community housing. That sort of service would also collect very important information which would provide an important backdrop to the affordable housing task force.

A handful of community development workers have just been appointed. That was out of the last budget. They will work with people in public housing. Our discussions with the sector and with people working in public housing is that those workers are going to indicate the need for more community development workers. It's refreshing that housing is now no longer being seen as just a bricks and mortar issue but that the need to truly manage tenants is being recognised. That is the first step. I believe there's going to be greater need for community development workers.

It's also worth recognising that community housing and public housing are two separate answers to the challenge facing us. They are not interchangeable.

THE CHAIR: Could you just expand a little bit on the differences between the two as you see them?

Mr Stubbs: Community housing can provide certain types of housing for certain individuals. Some focus on particular groups—maybe youth or maybe older people. But it also requires people to be very much a part of managing their tenancy and be involved in managing the organisation. Part of its philosophy is about the tenants being involved in managing the housing.

A lot of people, particularly those we're trying to get out of SAAP services into a longer term stable situation just aren't up to that. It's irrelevant, to state it bluntly, and that needs to be recognised. That might be something down the track for some people. It's not necessarily something we want to see as welfare housing per se.

If we wanted to focus on one group in particular with a need for housing, it would be indigenous people in the ACT. We have an urban indigenous population in the ACT which has health and other outcomes far below those of the rest of the community. We're not talking about people living in Kalgoorlie; we're talking about people living in the city of Canberra. I would urge this committee to recommend that the government take up the recommendations made by the Standing Committee on Health last year around indigenous health in the ACT as an important first step to taking up that issue. That committee made important recommendations on housing and health-related issues.

Legal issues for people living in poverty are really important. The Residential Tenancies Act in the ACT is in need of review. When the Residential Tenancies Act was changed in about 1998, there was agreement by the stakeholders involved that it would need to be reviewed in the future. That's now four years ago, and we think it does need to be reviewed.

There's agreement amongst a lot of legal practitioners around the ACT that we need to reassess legal aid, what it's doing and how it does it. I think we need to review legal aid in the ACT. Generally, there's a need for a consumer law service. In the past, we have advocated a financial legal service in the ACT but, on further assessment and further analysis, we believe there is a need for a consumer law service. That's broadening out from financial law to other consumer law products. Good examples are utilities and telecommunications. People, particularly people living in disadvantage and on low incomes, are being treated incredibly inequitably by telecommunication companies signing them up for different mobile phone deals and that kind of thing. People also find themselves in a whole lot of other difficulties they need legal assistance to work their way through.

The important thing to consider in all this is that if we don't invest in that kind of legal support it has ongoing ramifications for people's ability to afford housing, education and health services. If we don't keep people out of financial difficulties with utilities and with financial institutions offering them credit cards and telecommunication companies offering them mobile phones, we could find ourselves in much deeper difficulty.

Another group I'd like to draw to the attention of this committee is people with mental illness. A coronial report to be released later this year and other reports from other coronial inquests need to be taken up. The recommendations of those reports need to be taken up urgently. If we just did that, we'd be moving ahead in a very difficult area.

ACTCOSS has recently been involved in the production of a homelessness needs assessment in the ACT. Naturally, people with a mental illness feature quite prominently amongst people who are homeless, which is pretty distressing for all of us. We would urge you to seek that needs analysis from the Department of Education and Community Services and consider its findings.

THE CHAIR: You did it on contract for the department?

Mr Stubbs: That's right, yes. I would commend it to you, Mr Chair.

THE CHAIR: Has that been completed?

Mr Stubbs: It's in the final throes. It's a week away. Otherwise I would have taken the opportunity to provide it to you today.

THE CHAIR: We need to take a note of that for our inquiry.

Mr Stubbs: It's owned by the Department of Education and Community Services.

THE CHAIR: Yes, I understand that. We'll ask the minister for a copy of that.

Ms Nicholson: In our submission to the other inquiry we draw your attention to it because we thought that rewriting it to submit to the inquiry was probably bogus.

THE CHAIR: I think it might be useful if we could get it before we go into public hearing.

Mr Stubbs : I think that will be possible.

THE CHAIR: Before the other inquiry.

Mr Stubbs : A final area is school-based services. We've had some services provided in the schools under the schools as communities type of thinking in the ACT. We now need to assess what services have been provided in schools, how well they have been provided and how effective they have been and extend them.

Schools are a fantastic opportunity to provide important social services in this town, but they also provide an extremely important opportunity to link with other services outside schools. Sometimes it's absolutely necessary to provide a service outside the school but to have the referral mechanisms and the linkages. It might not be appropriate to provide certain services within a school, for a whole lot of reasons such as confidentiality and the feelings of the student involved.

I want to briefly talk about community services sector development and community services planning. A recent survey of ours showed that, in a six-month period during 2001, there were 15,000 turn-aways by community organisations in the ACT. This was due to a range of things. Increased costs for insurance, workers compensation, public liability and OH&S are being imposed on community organisations. The survey identified gaps in the direct services provided to individuals—to the homeless we have just discussed but also to others who are marginalised from our community—but also to families. Homeless families are being turned away. It is fairly horrendous stuff.

We think that developing the community services sector is a crucial part of developing some sort of social plan for the ACT. We're aware that this government is interested in developing a social plan. We think the time is right to get into the idea of social planning and developing the community services sector, a crucial third sector in the ACT which is a very important part of any social plan for this town.

We would suggest that there are issues around developing quality standards and professionalism in the community sector in the ACT. In the government-owned community services we've seen Michael Szwarcbord employ a quality expert to develop quality services in ACT Community Care. Those sorts of resources need to be made available to the non-government services to develop quality services in the ACT.

Data collection would help in the quality of the service but also planning for community services. In the last 12 months, there's been a lot of turmoil around the award that community services work under. There's still work to be done. ACTCOSS is currently representing issues in the Industrial Relations Commission, because there are still difficulties with the Social and Community Services Award.

There are other issues with respect to the development of this sector, such as training and development of the workers. This goes to quality and professionalism.

Pricing of the services which this sector provides is another issue—how much we pay for them and how we properly assess what the right price is. Generally, this government has already acknowledged the need to review service purchasing policy. There are opportunities to improve the way we purchase services from the community sector. It's not a normal commercial relationship. It's quite a different one which involves more than just this widget for this price.

Finally, I'd like to draw the committee's attention to the need to have a resourced process for planning services in the ACT. The process of service provision in the ACT has, for many years, been a process of basing our purchasing on historical factors. We have funded a service for many years; therefore, we'll continue doing so. I think we need to challenge that paradigm. I think the time is right to consider how we better do that. Instead of a closed-door process, we need a process which involves the stakeholders, the government, the consumers of those services and the providers of those services. We need to have an open and useful process. ACTCOSS has been developing a protocol by which we could introduce that kind of planning process for services in the ACT. That would be a crucial part of social planning in the ACT—how we plan to provide services, not just the geography of where services might sit around the ACT, although that's one aspect, but also what types of services, and this changes over time with any developing society.

We need to recognise that many of these services cost money. We certainly recognise that. But we need to recognise also that they're an investment. If we get in now, it means we're reducing later expenditure on homelessness, supported accommodation, supported employment or supported education. It's too easy not to make that expenditure now. It's worth while using windfall gains in different revenue areas on these types of services as an investment in our community, not just seeing it as an expenditure area. It seems to us that it's quite easy for governments say, "One of the things we're doing for our community is providing support to business by giving business money that trickles down to providing employment and improving our community." I'm here to tell you it doesn't. That trickle-down effect doesn't work. It bolsters business, which may or may not need it or doesn't use it, and the people who need to get into employment don't get that support.

We have a business development policy in the ACT. We don't have an employment promotion policy in the ACT. The sorts of things we're talking about are things that will help people get into employment, whether it be housing—if you can't get a job you don't have a place to live—or whether it be mental health services.

I'd like to thank the committee for its time today.

MS DUNDAS: You pointed to housing as a priority area. We are waiting on the outcomes of the task force, but you flagged that we need to put resources aside now for those outcomes, which I think is a fairly good idea. What do you see as the priorities? We can't just build more houses. Is the priority indigenous services or more money for community housing? What would be the priority, at a guess?

Mr Stubbs: It's difficult to guess. We obviously don't want to pre-empt what the task force is going to say. As some of you will know, I'm on that task force. The outcomes of that task force are going to be about financial expenditure but also about regulation—regulation about what developments occur, how developers contribute to the housing needs of this town, discrimination issues, private rental and that kind of thing.

There are a few issues around financial expenditure. One of our concerns is that we're selling off a lot of housing in the inner north, and we don't see the direct moving of that to other places. The theory is that we want to stop it all being in Ainslie and we want to move it to other places. But if we move it out of Ainslie, it must be provided in other places that are very close to town centres. We need to recognise that having affordable housing isn't just about having a house that you can afford to pay the rent on. It's about having a house you can afford to live in. Being close to a town centre is crucial. Other people have the luxury of the choice of jumping into a car or whatever. We need to make sure that if we sell places right next to the city we buy the same number of bedrooms right next to Woden town centre, right next to Belconnen or right next to emerging town centres like Gungahlin.

That would arguably be cost neutral, or it might require some bridging finance in the interim, but that kind of requirement needs to be there. We're concerned that it hasn't been there. There have been promises saying, "We're going to develop this complex and there's going to be public housing there," and less than half of that has come about. That kind of requirement is a minimum. It needs to be in place now. People can't get access to public housing.

There need to be more community development workers in public housing. At the moment people are getting evicted from public housing. Where do those people go? Public housing has unfortunately become the housing provider of last resort. If you get evicted from public housing, there's nowhere to go. We've got to stop that. The way to stop that is to work with the people, not just treat them as tenants. ACT Housing isn't a real estate agent.

Ms Nicholson: The referral agency—I think it's fleshed out more in our submission—is one of the crucial elements. If people go to the public housing provider and they're turned away there, they don't know what their options are. If there is a central agency, it stops a lot of the distress and the further exacerbation of people's difficult circumstances, because there is somebody case-working to find them accommodation.

In most cases, that referral agency might be able to refer them away, but in more difficult cases there would probably need to be coordination between them and the social welfare people who are working with the public housing people. And of course there's always a need to draw in other services when you find people in distress.

MRS CROSS: You referred to the sale of the inner north housing and replacing it with housing in similar areas. Would placing that housing in other town centres with services suffice? Does it have to be inner north?

Mr Stubbs: Absolutely. That's what we're talking about. If we take them out of Ainslie or Braddon—

MRS CROSS: They can go into another town centre that is near other services?

Mr Stubbs : We put them in a comparable place, right next to Woden town centre.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission. I thought it was pretty comprehensive. I note that you've made submissions to the rest of the standing committees looking at the issue, so there'll be a certain amount of cross-fertilisation, one would hope.

Mr Stubbs : Yes.

THE CHAIR: We're intrigued by, and looking forward to seeing some writings on, the housing referral service. One of the things I've picked up over the years talking to you in these committee meetings, Daniel, is that there needs to be a holistic approach to housing. Lack of housing is one of the larger symptoms of people's distress, and we need to have a holistic solution. There needs to be a systemic solution to a systemic problem.

Ms Nicholson: It comes up in every health report the Assembly has produced since 1989.

THE CHAIR: Therein lies a challenge for the current government. Thanks very much.

SALLY LOUISE EMERSON and

KILLION REUBEN BANDA

were called.

THE CHAIR: We're broadcasting proceedings. Of course, anything you say before the committee will be covered by privilege. Nonetheless, we need the truth because of the publicity over privilege in recent times. Thank you very much for your submission. I invite you to make an opening statement. Before you do, would you please identify yourselves and state the capacity in which you appear before the committee please?

Mr Banda: My name is Killion Banda. I work for the Migrant Resource Centre as Coordinator and Manager.

Mrs Emerson: My name is Sally Emerson. I'm the Community Development Officer at the Migrant Resource Centre. The English for living and home tutor programs at the Migrant Resource Centre provide English language and literacy classes to almost 300 migrants and refugees a year. Briefly, they cater for people who have completed adult migrant English program classes but still need to develop their English skills further, elderly people who arrive under the family reunion programs but find the mainstream English classes too rigorous, and spouses who are on bridging visas and who otherwise have no access to English classes. What makes these classes so successful is the relaxed and friendly atmosphere within the classes and the dedication of our teachers. We also run a home tutor program for clients who can't get to classes or who need extra help.

For the past four years, both of these programs have been funded through adult and community education grants administered by the Office of Training and Adult Education. The demand for these grants is quite fierce, and our programs have now grown and become so well established that the ACE grants can't really meet the needs of our programs. Our teachers at present are being paid well below award rates but remain with us because of their dedication and commitment to the students.

So far this year, we have almost 100 enrolments. This makes our classes very large. There are regularly over 30 students in two of our classes. The students have to share tables. The teachers have to put up with poorly situated and extremely small whiteboards that can't be cleaned properly. We need further funding so that extra classes can be established to reduce class sizes and to better services our clients.

These classes are meeting a need in the community that is not being met elsewhere. They not only provide English tuition but are also a social outlet for the students and assist them to understand the Australian way of life and to access information and services to integrate into Australian society.

I request that you recommend permanent funding for the English for living and home tutor programs. I've brought some additional material that will help you understand the kind of program we have. I would also like to invite you to come and look at the classes and invite your questions.

THE CHAIR: I've had the pleasure of going to the centre.

MRS CROSS: Me too.

THE CHAIR: If members haven't been there, I strongly suggest that you do and enjoy Killion's hospitality.

MRS CROSS: It's wonderful.

THE CHAIR: And he has a great way of sending you home with a nicely wrapped bucket of guilt. He's very good at it. It is not the role of the committee to be a decision-maker in the context of amounts but rather to make recommendations to the Assembly. That will be the process we look at. Have you applied for grants through the government grant process for this sort of support before? If you have, how come you haven't got it?

Mrs Emerson: We've been using ACE grants to offer some training and adult education. That's the only one. Before that we were getting a number of other grants hotch-potch from various organisations for small amounts and adding them together. That's as far as we've gone.

THE CHAIR: It would appear—and it may emerge later on—that many organisations apply for grants as they become aware of them, and they have the result of bandaiding the organisations' problems and giving them promise of things to come which are not realised. Perhaps the government ought to consider an information package for people who are involved in organisations not in the limelight so that they know where significant lumps of money can be accessed on a recurrent basis.

Mrs Emerson: This program is so well established and so well known that permanent funding is quite applicable to it.

THE CHAIR: The people who are using it are generally speaking adults, aren't they?

Mrs Emerson: All adults.

THE CHAIR: They are people who have migrated and chosen Canberra as their home. Without going down the assimilation line, the quality of life of people in the ACT who have come from somewhere else will be highly dependent upon their ability to communicate colloquially with people.

Mrs Emerson: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: And this is the main aim of the program, is it not?

Mrs Emerson: We have students who say, "Before I came to the Migrant Resource Centre I used to sit at home and cry because I couldn't do anything. Now I come to the Migrant Resource Centre; now I go on the busses by myself; now I go to the library; now I have many friends as a result of this program."

THE CHAIR: In fact, it is a real-time attack on social isolation.

Mrs Emerson: Exactly.

THE CHAIR: And one which is bearing considerable fruit. Do you get a sense that the load is increasing at an alarming rate, or is it just a really tough one.

Mrs Emerson: We get new students every day.

THE CHAIR: Do you turn them away?

Mrs Emerson: No. That's why we've got classes so big. We don't want to turn them away.

THE CHAIR: Is there an optimum class size beyond which it becomes very difficult?

Mrs Emerson: The ideal ESL class size would be 12 to 15, and we've got over 30.

THE CHAIR: Are there any ESL opportunities around town other than the MRC that could pick up the slack?

Mrs Emerson: There's the Adult Migrant English Service, but they serve a different clientele. The ones who come to us have been through that and want more or aren't eligible because they've got the wrong kind of visa.

MS DUNDAS: Can you explain what eligibility is required to be part of that other program, the adult migrant one?

Mrs Emerson: Migrants who come to Australia and have gained permanent residency status are eligible for 510 free hours of English language classes administered by the Adult Migrant English Service.

MS DUNDAS: And that's a permanent government-run service?

Mrs Emerson: Yes, funded by DIMIA. Some aren't eligible for those classes—for example, someone who has just married an Australian and therefore has to prove the legitimacy of the marriage and wait two years before they get permanent residency.

MRS CROSS: Who checks the validity of those who come? Is it you? Do you have in the centre a particular person who checks?

Mrs Emerson: We just ask them, "Are you eligible for AMEP classes?" They'll say yes or no. If they are, I send them there. It's a visa requirement.

MRS CROSS: Do you ask to see papers?

Mrs Emerson: Not all the time, no.

MS DUNDAS: So there's no other service in Canberra that provides what it is that you provide?

Mrs Emerson: No.

THE CHAIR: Some time ago I spoke to you, Killion, about this issue. This has been an ongoing difficulty for you for some years.

Mr Banda: Yes.

THE CHAIR: How long can you go without the thing collapsing?

Mr Banda: I think that we can't go anymore. We are being asked to tighten our belts and then tighten them even further. Some of the problems that are arising at the moment may be due to the fact that we are in a building that was built in the 1960s when issues of occupational health and safety were not in vogue. Apart from that there has been an increase in our clients, as is indicated in the classes, but we don't seem to have any room to expand. Apart from that, people with a disability cannot access the buildings. All the migrants cannot access it.

Apart from the English classes, there are other activities that communities do together as a whole community, not just the people who are able to enter the building. This has become a big disadvantage in terms of the services we're supposed to provide.

THE CHAIR: I'm getting a sense that with the redevelopment of that centre accommodation will have to be provided for the Migrant Resource Centre. Whatever form that takes needs to take into account that your activities have been restricted because of the standard of accommodation you've been in. There is a danger, is there not, that with expanded or better accommodation your clientele demand will increase significantly?

Mr Banda: That's right, yes.

THE CHAIR: And so the message to the government must be to have a good look at the likely impact of that.

Mr Banda: Yes.

MRS CROSS: Sally, you're not turning people away, which is fantastic. If you've got 30 people in a class, how effective is that?

Mrs Emerson: The fact that the students keep coming back means that we must be doing something. The classes are run on a very social level. The students come not only to learn English but to make friends. They get another social network. There's a lot of interaction in the break times. They're learning more about how to access things in the community through the classes. The size of the class in a way doesn't matter because of the rapport that's there.

MRS CROSS: How do you test the students on their ability in English. They're learning English. Do you give them exams? What do you do?

Mrs Emerson: Another reason we have the clientele we have—a lot of them are quite elderly—is that we don't test. We don't have any levels or tests. They keep coming back because there's no pressure compared with AMEP, for example.

MRS CROSS: What are the age groups of the people, roughly?

Mrs Emerson: Nineteen to 85. We have PhDs; we have a lot of students who have never been to school in their life.

MRS CROSS: What's the average age?

Mrs Emerson: Probably over 50. It would be 50 or 60.

MRS CROSS: Do you find you've got more men than women?

Mrs Emerson: More women. Probably over two-thirds are women.

MRS CROSS: Do they work, or are they homemakers?

Mrs Emerson: The reason they're able to come is that they're at home. Either they are retired or this is what they do. Their life is coming to the MRC.

MRS CROSS: And how many teachers do you have at the centre?

Mrs Emerson: Six or seven, but part time. Most of them would teach four hours a week, some only two hours a week. Some teach six hours a week, and a lot of volunteers run conversation groups and other classes as well. Tuggeranong has about seven volunteer teachers. They're all qualified teachers, by the way.

MRS CROSS: I've been to the centre a few times for some very pleasant social events, as Killion knows. Is the space that you turn into a dance area for social events used for the classes?

Mrs Emerson: One class is held in there, one is in room 3 upstairs, which is a Migrant Resource Centre room, and then we hire two extra rooms from the Griffin Centre downstairs. They're just the meeting rooms that are part of the centre.

MRS CROSS: Are you finding you're running out of space?

Mrs Emerson: Not space. The rooms are large enough, but there are not enough tables. The students are sharing tables—three to a table sometimes.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time. That's been most useful.

KEN HORSHAM,

BRUCE McKENZIE and

GINNY HEWLETT

were called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome to today's hearing. For those of you who will be heard later, I will read this out now so that I will not have to read it out again.

As you know, the committee's inquiry is part of the budget consultation process, and we are looking at priorities for service delivery. The committee will examine the evidence before it and make recommendations to the Assembly. We do not make decisions about budget matters; it is the responsibility of the government and the Assembly to make those decisions. We have a recommendatory power only.

These hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections but also certain responsibilities. This means that you are protected from certain legal actions, such as being sued for defamation for what you tell us today; it also means you have a responsibility to tell the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter. A look at the news lately will tell you why this is so.

I should also advise you that the proceedings will be broadcast through to public service offices, as well as throughout this building. In the future it will quite likely also be electronically broadcast through radio and TV, if these are interested in doing so, since the Assembly has passed some provisions for that to occur. That will not be the case today, obviously. I propose that we offer you the first five minutes to make some initial points. Then members will ask questions.

Before we start, for the purposes of Hansard could I ask you to state your name and identify the capacity in which you appear before the committee.

Mr Horsham: I am Ken Horsham, chair of Coalition of Community Housing Organisations of the ACT.

Mr McKenzie: I am Bruce McKenzie, treasurer of CCHOACT.

Mrs Hewlett: I am Ginny Hewlett, executive officer of CCHOACT.

THE CHAIR: Welcome. Ken, would you like to make an opening statement?

Mr Horsham: Thank you, Mr Hargreaves, for the opportunity to draw attention to some critical emerging issues for the ACT community. Rental supply remains tight within the ACT, and there has been a rapid escalation in rent levels over the last few years or so. That is increasing problems in the housing market, particularly for people on lower incomes.

In putting together our suggestions for matters the Assembly might wish to consider in relation to this year's budget, we have had three principles in mind. One is to increase the transparency of the budget process so that people know how much money is being spent on community housing and so that the community housing sector can be accountable for the efficiency of its use of the resources that are being dedicated to it.

The second one is that we believe there is a solid case—and we have put forward some suggestions in that paper—for making more effective use of the existing funds. That is not to say that I would walk away from a debate about increasing the level of funding to housing but, recognising some realities—

THE CHAIR: There is no use wrecking your reputation now, Ken, is there?

Mr Horsham: Third are some suggestions for better use of both the existing investment we have in housing and of the asset stock. I should explain that the ACT is committed to a goal under the bilateral agreement with the Commonwealth, the Commonwealth-State Housing Agreement, to increase the supply of community housing to 1,000 dwellings over a five-year period.

In the last three years, that supply has increased by 200 dwellings, and there has been nothing since February 2000. That leaves a sizeable challenge for the remaining few years. So: there is an existing goal to grow the community section by 1,000 dwellings, and we have achieved 200 so far. Hence our concentration on suggesting ways it might be achieved.

There are, in all, about 500 tenancies in community housing now and, given the growth that has occurred, we believe it is time to make explicit how those funds are being used. It is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain a complete picture of housing assistance outlays within the ACT because, while the budget presents some of the ACT Housing results, it disguises within the purchaser component of appropriations the operations of community housing.

We are suggesting to the committee that a way of increasing that transparency would be to treat community housing in the budget the same way as public housing is treated, so that you effectively have two parallel organisations, with both outputs and an identification of what they are producing.

THE CHAIR: Why would that increase transparency, Ken, other than for people who have difficulty sleeping at night and want to read budget papers?

Mr Horsham: Oh, no. I think there is a public accountability issue there, John. We ought to be identifying how much money we spend on community housing, and the community housing sector itself ought to be accountable in whom it assists. Around 94 per cent of the tenants that are in community housing cannot afford to pay the full rent. The vast majority of them meet the same eligibility conditions as for ACT Housing. In effect, we are talking about two comparable systems. All I am arguing is that we ought to treat those two systems in the same way in terms of accountability to the Assembly.

THE CHAIR: Does that recommendation extend to annual reporting as well as budget information?

Mr Horsham: I believe so.

THE CHAIR: Are you saying that any public declaration from government—because that is the source—on the situation of community housing in its generic sense ought to be split for those two groups so that people can see which is which and how much is what?

Mr Horsham: In effect, the department ought to be required to report on the operations of both ACT Housing and the community housing sector in that standard budget format. The funds are being used by the department for identical purposes, and you are only getting part of the picture now. So we are arguing: let's complete that picture so that the Assembly and the community can have a fairer consideration of issues.

THE CHAIR: That sounds like a fair recommendation. We will see.

Mr Horsham: There are four or five suggestions that we have made in the paper for ways to increase the supply of community housing and the effectiveness with which the funds are being made available. One of those suggestions is to stop the transfer program, whereby dwellings had in the past been transferred to community housing organisations.

THE CHAIR: Before you go on, Ken: of the number you were saying you have achieved, how many of those were the transfers?

Mr Horsham: 209 were transfers.

THE CHAIR: When you said the goal was a supply of 1,000 dwellings in community housing—

Mr Horsham: Yes, that was not defined.

THE CHAIR: It was not defined?

Mr Horsham: Not to my recollection.

THE CHAIR: So, if you wanted to be really clever, does that mean you could transfer out of the public housing stock into the community housing stock, and say, "Hello, we've achieved the target"?

Mr Horsham: Yes, and that is what happens in other states.

THE CHAIR: Would that be a three-card trick?

MS DUNDAS: That is not something we would recommend.

THE CHAIR: No, that would be the three-card trick. That would be an absolute—

Mr Horsham: We have members who became involved in community housing with an expectation that stock numbers would grow, and they have received small stock numbers. As a consequence we have created an infrastructure that is a bit fragile. They were expecting more dwellings to come across, so they have been in a suspended state for a little while. We are urging that that issue be confronted and resolved so that we can build a viable community housing sector.

What we have tried to do with that program is link the provision of human services and the provision of housing services to provide more effective support to people in housing stress. We are anyway applying the same eligibility criteria in everything, as ACT Housing does. However, as an organisation, we will still continue to advocate for an increase in the overall social housing supply—even though we believe an essential element of that is stock transfer as well.

THE CHAIR: The track I was heading down was whether or not there was an inappropriate use of stock transfer for the sake of making the numbers look good when we are talking about the bilateral agreement. If you really wanted to, you could do it. What you are saying is that you want us to get on with putting more stock out there.

Mr Horsham: Stock transfer is one of the options for increasing the supply. The transfer of title to those 209 dwellings that have already been transferred across is a second element of that. The community sector can then borrow to leverage expansion and further growth of the social housing supply from use of the title that is there. The assets have already been transferred to Community Housing Canberra, anyway. What we are now saying is, “Let’s transfer the title as well,” so that that organisation, which has got substantial government representation on its board, can continue to expand the number and increase supply through using those resources in a better way than is possible now.

THE CHAIR: Do you know why that did not happen at the same time?

Mr Horsham: I think we were all too busy.

THE CHAIR: Okay.

Mr Horsham: That is a comment from a person who was involved.

THE CHAIR: I can understand that.

Mr Horsham: The third element of our suggested growth strategy for social housing is to dedicate an increased share of the CSHA capital funds specifically to community housing. That would then enable community housing providers to use both their GST status and PBI status to make more effective use of the funds that are available for investment in capital.

We have put proposals to the government along those lines, and I know the government is currently considering some of them. There are three proposals: to transfer additional stock to increase supply, to transfer title to enable community housing to borrow to leverage and increase supply and to dedicate more of the capital funds under the CSHA to community housing.

THE CHAIR: Do you know what the percentage split of that is at the moment?

Mr Horsham: Mr Hargreaves, one of the reasons for advocating a transparent budget allocation is so that we can answer that question for you.

THE CHAIR: Okay. Point taken.

Mr Horsham: About \$1 million per annum is currently being spent. We are suggesting that that increase to about \$3 million per annum dedicated to capital injection.

THE CHAIR: I was wondering what the share was between the two.

Mr Horsham: It is minor. But all around Australia governments are involved in quite aggressive programs of expansion of community housing, fundamentally promoting consumer choice and community sovereignty.

Mr McKenzie: Nationally, the percentage is 6.2 per cent and in the ACT it is something like 2.1 per cent of community housing as compared to public housing.

Mr Horsham: I think that is what influenced the former government.

THE CHAIR: So would your organisation be reasonably happy if the government were to look at the national average?

Mr Horsham: That is the policy position that we adopted prior to the last election. As an objective for this term, whichever government was going to be in ought to have as its aim to lift it to that level.

THE CHAIR: A point the committee will need to consider when we go into deliberative session is whether or not to recommend to the Assembly and the government that they look at the disparity between the ACT percentage and the national average.

MRS CROSS: Taking a step back from your recommendation of getting more stock, how often do you think the circumstances and needs of housing tenants should be reviewed in case they no longer qualify for housing?

Mrs Hewlett: For the receipt of housing assistance, perhaps?

MRS CROSS: Yes.

Mrs Hewlett: The premise of community housing is to provide people with housing assistance and housing for as long as they require that housing. It is about building communities; it is about enabling people to know that they are secure enough to build their lives.

You will find that there is a universal policy in application across the ACT of reviewing people's incomes, certainly once a year if not twice a year, and people's rents are adjusted accordingly. There is a very small percentage in the community housing sector currently paying market rent.

Because of the need to build communities, we need to be really careful about reviewing income for tenants' eligibility to remain in a particular property. That would be very destructive in terms of trying to build communities and community capacity. Community housing providers would generally agree that it is perfectly fair to review people's incomes, particularly where they are receiving some rebate on their rent, but it is not perfectly fair to suggest that, if people's incomes are above the level of eligibility, they should be dismissed from their property.

Mr Horsham: The reality is that people who earn above that pay market rent and, in effect, subsidise the operations of the rest of the housing system. When you start to reduce the number of tenants paying market rent—and this is a classic problem for ACT Housing—that source of income goes down and as a consequence you have funding problems associated with operating your organisation.

MRS CROSS: Am I correct, Ginny, in assuming that the assessment is done at least once a year and sometimes twice a year and that it is means tested?

Mrs Hewlett: That is right. People have to provide a statement of income, and their rent is assessed according to their income level.

MRS CROSS: Is that the rule, or is it the exception? Is that something you do or something that is done on an ad hoc basis? I just need to understand the system.

Mrs Hewlett: In effect, there are different sets of circumstances operating for different providers. The providers who are members of Community Housing Canberra Limited abide by a set of policies that have been written to reflect the national community housing standards. One of those standards concerns rent reviews and how to allocate a reasonable rent in light of people's incomes.

The CHC providers undertake that process as part of their agreement with CHC. Providers who are not members of CHC do not have that compunction. What we are trying to do in sector development and to bring the sector to a fairly uniform standard of service provision in the ACT is make sure that in critical areas all providers are more or less—

MRS CROSS: Apply the same rules.

Mrs Hewlett: Yes, are applying the same rules. We are working with providers along those lines at the moment.

MRS CROSS: What do you do with people who can pay but won't?

Mrs Hewlett: That has to be the provider's choice. They have to have an internal policy that deals with that.

MRS CROSS: Well, what do you do in your role?

Mrs Hewlett: In my role I advise the providers to develop policies that indicate that every member of the housing association or co-op will pay a fair and equitable share of their income in rent towards the operating expenses of the organisation.

MRS CROSS: And is that followed? How do you police it, and how is it implemented and monitored?

Mrs Hewlett: It is not my role to police it. It is my role to advise, strongly recommend and provide draft policies where applicable. Those are the sorts of things we do.

Mr McKenzie: Can I add to that? I am the Chief Executive Officer of Community Housing Canberra.

MRS CROSS: Please.

Mr McKenzie: To put things into perspective, we have only seven out of 209 properties where 75 per cent of the market rent is being paid and only three out of those 209 where market rent is being paid. The vast majority of our people are in receipt of a rental rebate. It is mandatory policy that all tenants are income tested twice a year and have their rebated rent reviewed.

We have very low levels of arrears, and that is a reflection of the success that has been achieved through the tenancy management style. Arrears are between 1 and 1½ per cent of the rent bill. ACT Housing's was about 4 per cent and for the industry it is about that figure. So it is very low. There is no issue of people who will not pay their rent.

Mr Horsham: It is influenced, Bruce, by the nature of community housing, the engagement of tenants as the managers of that community housing system and the tenants' participation in the organisations themselves.

MRS CROSS: I am interested to—

Mr Horsham: So there's a sense of responsibility there.

MRS CROSS: Sure. Thanks, Ken. You just said the review is mandatory and is done twice a year. Ginny said that they would like it to be done but cannot force it to be done. How can it be mandatory if it cannot be implemented?

Mr McKenzie: They are two separate programs. Community Housing Canberra has a contract with government that says that we must comply with the policy of the public rental housing assistance program.

Mrs Hewlett: Not all providers are members of—

MRS CROSS: So one is a more ideal set-up than the other?

Mrs Hewlett: Yes.

MRS CROSS: Okay. I understand.

Mrs Hewlett: And we are working with historical allegiances at the moment. Some co-ops, some housing associations, have been in existence a lot longer than CHC has. Part of the growth and development of the community housing sector is about bringing everybody onto a level playing field.

MRS CROSS: Ginny, one last question. How do you think income tests should be calculated?

Mrs Hewlett: It is a vexed question. We have a system operating at the moment where people are charged 25 per cent of their gross income. I have a personal, philosophical view that rent should be assessed according to people's after-housing need. I believe that people need enough after-housing income to sustain themselves, and if it is not so at 25 per cent of income, we should not be charging 25 per cent of income. But that is my personal view. At the moment, our policy across the ACT is 25 per cent of gross income. So we will be having some debates.

Mr McKenzie: That is currently being addressed by the affordable housing task force, which Ginny and I are both members of. One of the issues is whether we should be looking at a flat percentage or at some sort of residual, after-housing income.

Mr Horsham: It is really complex once you enter the area of withdrawal rates and the operation of the multiplicity of income maintenance systems. If you settle on some of those, the impact of the withdrawals can create really severe poverty traps, so there has to be a great deal of care if you start changing some of those arrangements. I think that is why everyone tends to adopt a fairly straightforward measure.

Mrs Hewlett: A percentage measure is a safety net because there are value judgements about what a reasonable after-housing income might be. But we know that there are a considerable number of families in the ACT whose after-housing income is insufficient to sustain body and soul. We will be having some debates.

MS DUNDAS: Could you give me a rough demographic profile of the people using community housing?

Mr Horsham: We might be able to be precise.

MS DUNDAS: Good.

Mr Horsham: What I have here is on community housing tenants of Community Housing Canberra, so it is not a complete picture of the community housing sector, but at least it will be indicative.

MS DUNDAS: Before you tell me, what is the percentage of people using community housing who use Community Housing Canberra?

Mr McKenzie: Close to 50 per cent.

Mr Horsham: 42½ per cent are single parents; 7½ are tenants as a consequence of domestic violence; 6.5 per cent are from an indigenous background; 3½ per cent are people with physical disabilities; 10 per cent are dealing with mental health issues and

8 per cent with drug issues; 29 per cent are young people—only 5.5 per cent are older Canberrans—and 16 per cent are from a non-English speaking background. Of the total, 98 per cent are in receipt, as Bruce said, of the rental rebate—that is, cannot afford to pay the market rent for the property.

THE CHAIR: Can we make this the last question?

MRS CROSS: Yes, sir. This is a very simplistic statement, but do you think the solution is to just keep buying more houses—having more houses on the books?

Mrs Hewlett: We are not in a position to even begin to give an answer, but at this stage of the game I can say we do have a critical shortage of dwellings and, until such time as we can address that shortage, we are not going to be able to look at the longer-term picture. There is never going to be one answer; there will be answers across a whole range of areas and portfolio responsibilities. But from where we are coming at the moment the supply shortage issue is critical. As Bruce has mentioned, he and I are both in the affordable housing task force, and in every forum that any of us have access to we are saying the same thing: there really is a supply shortage and somehow we have got to address it.

Mr Horsham: Mrs Cross, perhaps I can draw your attention to the attachment to our budget submission. In that document, issued in about October last year, we drew attention to the fact that there is a really narrow range of housing policies and programs in the ACT. Implicit in that statement on our part is the notion that there needs to be a complex range of relatively tightly targeted programs targeting different levels of housing need.

We tend to be a bit black and white, and in the ACT we largely rely exclusively on a single response at the moment. The Commonwealth spends a lot of money on rent assistance in this community—that is one housing policy response—and there are modest programs in community housing, but there is almost nothing, apart from the first home owners scheme, to help people who are on the cusp of home ownership. Of course, that is a something the affordable housing task force has confronted.

MRS CROSS: Thank you.

Mr Horsham: Mr Chairman, we made some other important recommendations in our submission: in relation to indigenous housing needs in particular, for a review of the residential tenancies legislation and about the future funding arrangements of this organisation.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Mr Horsham, you may not have been here when we spoke to Daniel Stubbs about costs. He pointed us to the indigenous housing issue as well. But I thank you. We will be looking at the submissions. One of the things that have emerged from our inquiry is the quality of the submissions that we received. In fact, it has been such as to allow us to cut down the number of issues we need to discuss with people personally. We thank you for the comprehensive nature of your submission.

Mr Horsham: Thank you for the opportunity.

MEREDITH HUNTER and

ALEXANDRA CAHILL

were called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome. You heard all the spiel, so I am not going to go through it all again.

Ms Hunter: We know that spiel.

THE CHAIR: Thanks very much for sparing us your time. We compliment you on your submission. As I mentioned just a moment ago, most of the submissions have been really good, and we are quite anxious to have folks come along and see if they want to add to their submissions. It is often difficult for people to put it all down on paper, particularly for those working in your sectors. Sometimes your personal perspectives are worth more than the written words. I invite you to make an opening statement. Please begin by identifying yourselves for the record.

Ms Hunter: I am Meredith Hunter, executive officer of the Youth Coalition of the ACT.

Ms Cahill: I am Alexandra Cahill, policy and project officer of the Youth Coalition of the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Welcome. Over to you.

Ms Hunter: We just wanted to give a five-minute overview. Obviously, we would say that everything in the submission is a priority, but we have pulled a few things out. You may have noted that some of the issues of concern listed in the submission were Commonwealth issues, and they are those related to the common youth allowance. We wish to raise again with government that there are ongoing problems with income support for young people, particularly with the punitive approach to breaching that is taken by the federal government.

I think, in the last financial year, the federal government saved \$1.8 million by breaching people in the ACT. We see that as shifting costs to the ACT. It is shifting costs to the government, to charities, to community organisations, and to families. We wanted to raise that again.

THE CHAIR: When they save that sort of money, where do people get the money to replace it?

Ms Hunter: They go to the roadhouse to get free meals. They access emergency relief funds. It could be that they have to go to the Credit and Debt Counselling Service to assist them to put off payments, or work out some way to pay off rent or any other sorts of financial liabilities they have. It comes back onto the Canberra community.

THE CHAIR: Yes. That is what you mean by cross-subsidisation and cost shifting.

Ms Hunter: Absolutely. The next matter we wanted to go into was the commission for children and young people. This standing committee is the best one to look at this issue in further detail outside of the budget process. However, here in our submission we have requested that some funds be made available so that the Youth Coalition can undertake some research and consultation to raise awareness about this commission and consider what it might do, what it does in other states, and what it might look like in the ACT, where its functions would not duplicate other functions, and so on.

We have put that in the submission in the hope of getting some money to carry out that research between July and December. Then there would be a report and recommendations available that government could consider in the next budget cycle.

THE CHAIR: That is good timing, yes.

Ms Hunter: Care and protection is an area that we particularly want to highlight today. We are very concerned about what is happening in the care and protection system. Even in the last year, there have been items in the media about family services workers going on strike. It has been a long time since the number of staff on deck was at 100 per cent. Of course, we are very concerned about the outcomes for the children and young people going through that system.

Ms Cahill: We are particularly concerned about multiple placements, and continuously changing case workers, which cause great instability for the young people within that system.

Ms Hunter: Quite a lot of research has been done across Australia. The CREATE Foundation, particularly, has been quite involved in all of this. That foundation is there for young people and children who have been through the system. That research is showing that the outcomes for young people and children are very poor—frighteningly poor. In fact, there have been inquiries held in other states and territories, and some of those have actually resulted in the establishment of a commission for children and young people. Again, we think that this is the standing committee that should deal with this matter.

In our submission, we are pressing for an inquiry into this area. It is not just about highlighting the problems: it is also about being able to move that step forward to look at some solutions and think outside the square. Many decades ago, of course, there was institutionalisation and orphanages. There was then a big move away from that into other areas: foster care and substitute care.

However, I think we need to rethink the system a bit more. Foster care and substitute care are struggling as well. They do rely on having people out there in the community who are able to take children into their homes. We really think it is time to have an inquiry, and to move that next step to see what other solutions and what other ideas can be put in place.

We should consider the numbers of young people who end up in jail, who are unemployed, and who have poor literacy and numeracy, because they have had disrupted schooling. We should also consider the whole gamut of issues related to mental health and other topics. We really want the committee to consider having an inquiry in this area.

THE CHAIR: Have you thought about the terms of reference for such an inquiry?

Ms Hunter: We have not at this stage, but we would be very pleased to be involved in drafting such terms of reference.

THE CHAIR: Yes. It might be helpful at some stage if you would drop a line to the committee indicating your opinion on that. I know that one of the things that has concerned me about young people in the ACT over recent years has been the lack of a holistic approach to the problems they have. When I become involved with kids in Quamby, I find out that there is a family issue in the background or there are problems at school. You can fix one, but it is like squeezing a balloon. I would be interested in anybody's ideas on how we can attack the myriad problems. If you would shoot us a letter on that, we would certainly give it some thought.

MRS CROSS: Why do you think we need a youth commissioner?

Ms Hunter: In some other states, youth commissioners do have care and protection or similar functions, but I guess the main aim of those commissioners is really to be an advocate for the rights of children and young people, highlighting those rights. Those positions also involve examining why young people's participation in decision-making processes across the board is so important. The New South Wales commission has put out a whole big kit on youth participation, and how organisations can have that actually operating within their organisation, workplace or whatever it happens to be.

Australia is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The commissioner could have the role of ensuring that, at a local level, the rights of children and young people are being upheld. Obviously, this research we hope to undertake would not be about just taking a model from another jurisdiction and plonking it here. It would really be about seeing what is already out there. We do have a community advocate who has certain responsibilities related to care and protection. It would be about seeing what is here, and which functions are not being picked up, or which could be picked up a lot better than they currently are.

MRS CROSS: Where are there commissioners in Australia?

Ms Cahill: In Queensland, New South Wales and Tasmania.

MRS CROSS: Right. Do you know how long they have been in their positions?

Ms Cahill: In Queensland, I believe since 1995. In New South Wales, I could not be specific, but a couple of years.

MRS CROSS: All right.

THE CHAIR: Can I ask you a question on this matter too? It seems to me that a lot of folks like you and us often deal with kids who have fallen through the cracks. How much of a problem is it for the kids who have not fallen through the cracks, and have actually come from quite functional families? Are they underrepresented in those accessing such services? In other words, are they the hidden people, those who are likely to fall through

the cracks but who, through the grace of God, do not, and actually happen to survive by themselves? Is it good enough to leave them be?

Ms Cahill: I think our role at the Youth Coalition is developing policy and procedure, and encouraging the aspirations of all young people. A lot of the time the focus is on those who are at risk, which is very important, but our role is to develop all young people, and reinforcing the rights and aspirations of all young people.

Ms Hunter: Even young people who come from functional families and have pursued opportunities available to them are not necessarily the best advocates for their own rights. This can be seen in examples such as the fact that young people are very unlikely to appeal against Centrelink or ACT Housing decisions. We do have work to do to raise those issues, and raise young people's awareness of how they can pursue their rights in those areas.

MRS CROSS: The programs you mentioned earlier started in Queensland in 1995, and then in New South Wales and Tasmania, I think you said?

Ms Cahill: Yes, that is correct.

MRS CROSS: Have you assessed them and, if you have, have they been successful, how did you measure that success, and what positive outcomes resulted?

Ms Hunter: We have not measured the success, Helen. I guess that looking at what sorts of evaluations have been done on those commissions in the states would be part of this research. However, on the ground, as a representative of the peak youth body in the ACT, I have regular contact with the other peak youth organisations around Australia. We have a teleconference every six weeks. There have always been good reports on what those commissions are doing at that level, but obviously that would be part of our research: "Did you evaluate after two years? Do you do a regular evaluation?"

MRS CROSS: Sure, I understand.

THE CHAIR: Can I just ask you another question that follows on from what I was alluding to before? It seems to me that we try to provide a lot of service to kids at risk, and I know that has been Kerrie Tucker's big windmill for some time, and all power to her arm, I say. However, it seems to me that often we are doing things in a reactive mode. We keep trying to provide services and catch up, and the preventive and diagnostic work still needs a little bit of government attention.

I draw my knowledge from the research into youth suicide of some years ago, where a South Australian expert—I have forgotten his name—did some work predicting who was going to be at risk. We can apply a lot of resources to the reactive and curative processes but, with some investment in the diagnosis, we may be saving on the resources that we need to do the others. Do you think that a commissioner for young people would assist in that focus?

Ms Hunter: Yes, definitely. I think the commissioner could identify those emerging issues and be at the front end, rather than at the back end. We know that not only is working only at the back end going to be more damaging to the individuals concerned,

but it is also going to be far more expensive for taxpayers and government to deal with. We do talk in our submission about the importance of early intervention and prevention, as well as of picking up what is in the here and now.

Ms Cahill: A report that was produced by the National Children's and Youth Law Centre in 1995 stated, "The Commissioner for Children should take an interdisciplinarian approach and should be free to work at a legal, social and political level."

THE CHAIR: Good luck on the third.

Ms Cahill: This is our most important level.

MRS CROSS: We agree with you and there are some very reasonable people on that level with whom you will be able to deal.

THE CHAIR: And we know both of them.

MRS CROSS: All three actually.

THE CHAIR: Sorry.

Ms Cahill: Mr Hargreaves, I believe that it is exactly as you say—it is important to develop youth policy that integrates all young people.

Ms Hunter: I think some of that has been done. We need to acknowledge that the Young People's Framework is out there, that all departments have signed a commitment to that, and that they will be reporting on it. That is a good step forward.

THE CHAIR: All the oldies like me, all the grandfathers, keep saying to the young people, "Take responsibility for your actions and act your age"—as I was once heard to say to my three-year-old granddaughter, and she was. We keep saying, "Accept responsibility for your own decisions" and such things, but at the same time we do not give those people the personal power to actually do that. Do you think that providing an advocate with the strength that you are suggesting here will actually empower young people?

Ms Hunter: I believe so. I think that position definitely has the scope to do that.

Ms Cahill: I think it will provide the greater community with knowledge and awareness, and that is what is needed, so that children's issues and children's rights are at the top of the agenda.

MRS CROSS: The more important thing, I think, is having someone who is skilled and experienced managing those issues and those children. I think that the role is a good thing to look at, and we are going to be looking at it on our standing committee—the three of us agree on that. However, from my experience, the most important thing is to ensure that we have the most skilled and experienced people in anything they are doing, in any department.

At the moment, we have the department of community services looking into children's issues. I think it is very important that, whoever is doing it, whatever title they have, whatever department they are in, they are skilled and qualified. These services may come under any umbrella, but it is the expertise of the workers that is paramount.

Ms Cahill: That is right.

Ms Hunter: Linked to that was the inquiry John mentioned before that Kerrie had been heavily involved in. One of the issues they examined was children at risk. We would urge your standing committee to go back to that report, which was tabled in 1997, to see if there are any recommendations that just fell off, are still relevant and should be implemented. A lot of work did go into those inquiries from all areas of government, so we would encourage you to do that as well.

Another matter of concern is housing. Of course, you had CCHOACT on before us, talking about housing. Our view on this is that housing is central to having a functioning life. In the last five years or so, there has been a decrease in the amount of funding that has been coming through for housing. It is absolutely critical, in our eyes, that this be addressed. Part of this is to do with Minister Wood's involvement in the CSHA negotiations. Obviously, the Commonwealth has a pretty big hand in all of that.

However, we have been encouraging him to push forward to seek an increase in the amount of funding for social housing. The importance of affordable housing has been pointed out in the poverty task group report. What we have had in the territory, at least over the last four years, is a very low private rental availability rate. That has pushed rents up, which has made renting less affordable. However, having less money in public housing is also hindering those organisations' ability to house people on the waiting list in a timely manner, and to provide appropriate housing to people on the waiting list. We really do urge that housing be put on this government's agenda.

THE CHAIR: I think it is looming large at this time. Three out of four submissions have mentioned it so far. It will have to be a subject for discussion.

Ms Hunter: Absolutely. We have ageing housing stock in the ACT. I actually sit on the housing advisory committee. I understand that ACT Housing are putting a strategic asset management plan to Minister Wood. That is a great thing, but it will obviously take money to implement it. This town was built on public housing. It grew a fabulous community, and I think we really need to continue supporting that.

The other thing is we did have a youth housing task force, which produced a report. Some recommendations of that report are still outstanding, and we would also urge the government to implement them. One of those is a youth night shelter. The idea is that it would not be a refuge, but it somewhere people can go to have a shower, be safe for the night, have a bed, a hot meal, and also have access to information and referral.

THE CHAIR: Is this one of the ways you are trying to tackle the problem of homeless kids?

Ms Hunter: Absolutely. There are many who do not want to go to refuges, for whatever reason. They actually may have been through the refuge cycle and cannot get back on it again.

THE CHAIR: It might just be in that one night of crisis, too.

Ms Cahill: Exactly.

Ms Hunter: It could be that one night of crisis.

Ms Cahill: Or arriving from interstate.

Ms Hunter: Yes. There are those issues. We would like to see the youth night shelter proceed over the next year. I know that there does need to be some research done on how, what and why. There are quite a few legal issues that do need careful consideration, but it is a suggestion that we would like to see taken up.

MRS CROSS: Is your recommendation to increase the availability of housing?

Ms Hunter: The first recommendation is definitely an increase in the funding for social housing in the ACT, and particularly public housing. That obviously depends on a Commonwealth-ACT discussion as well. As well as that, we would definitely urge that the youth night shelter go ahead. The other thing that we have raised was that there is a gap in crisis accommodation in Belconnen and Gungahlin. What that means is that, if a young person from that area has to leave home because of abuse or whatever going on, if they cannot get into, say, Canberra Youth Refuge, which is in the inner north, they may have to go down to Wanniassa. That takes them away from school—

THE CHAIR: Sorry, Gungahlin and?

Ms Hunter: Belconnen.

THE CHAIR: All right.

Ms Hunter: We are talking about a considerable area. When you look at the demographics of the distribution of young people across the ACT, you can see that we have a huge youth population in Belconnen, and we will have a growing population in Gungahlin. We see that as a critical gap that does need to be filled.

THE CHAIR: What is the situation like in the Lanyon valley in Tuggeranong?

Ms Hunter: Again, that is going to be a growing youth population, as you know. I know you have been very much involved with the youth centre down there. It is interesting. There are a number of youth refuges—I mean two to three—down in the Tuggeranong valley.

THE CHAIR: Yes, I know there are some in the Tuggeranong valley. I was just thinking—

Ms Hunter: Not that far down south, but starting to get into the valley, yes.

THE CHAIR: It just occurred to me that the demographics in some parts of Gungahlin have a counterpart in the Lanyon valley part of Tuggeranong, but they do not for the rest of the valley. I am very keen to see preventive measures arriving and growing before the crisis turns up, so that the problem grows into the solution, and not the other way around.

Ms Hunter: There are programs on the ground that the youth sector is delivering at the moment. In fact, I noticed that the YWCA will be speaking to the committee later. One of the things they have launched recently was the supporting adolescents program, which is working with families and young people to provide reconciliation, a bit of respite and that sort of thing.

Youth refuges work that way too. If there is a chance of reconciliation, they know that the first three days are critical, and they will work very hard in those first three days to try to reconcile that young person with the family, to get them back home again. Once the period is over three days, it gets harder and harder. They are quite successful in what they do. We have some very good youth workers, and also youth refuge workers, out there, who are achieving success.

MRS CROSS: Do you see links between youth problems and the education levels?

Ms Hunter: Definitely. Those people who have literacy and numeracy problems, who do not have even their year 10 certificates, are obviously very much disadvantaged out there in the workplace. They are disadvantaged in all walks of life. If people cannot read and cannot add up, they can be taken for a ride in a number of walks of life. These problems are also barriers to participation in a whole range of areas. Yes, it is very critical.

THE CHAIR: Not to mention the shame factor.

Ms Hunter: Absolutely.

MRS CROSS: Do you think there should be a greater emphasis on resourcing areas such as education and creating jobs, rather than on resourcing a child commissioner and a specialised youth legal service? I am trying to gauge what you consider to be more important.

THE CHAIR: Is it an either/or situation though?

MRS CROSS: That is why I am asking these people.

Ms Hunter: We would say that it is not an either/or situation.

I know this is not one of this committee's responsibilities, because it is to do with education, but we have also highlighted the alternative education providers in our submission, and we have asked for some parity in the funding levels between the community-run providers and the government-run ones. We have some very good alternative education programs running out there. They range from a school that is run at Youth in the City through to homework programs and tutoring assistance, the kinds of

things that are run in youth centres. Yes, we would love to see more resources put into those, and more parity in how funds are allocated by the department.

MRS CROSS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: I am going to have to wrap it up with one last question, colleagues.

MS DUNDAS: You are not going to like it, because you said that they are all priorities, and I know that they are all priorities, but can you pick one area? I hate to do it, but is there one that is screaming out louder than the others at this point in time?

THE CHAIR: That is also a trick question. It also can be a trick question, because one of them can be so important that it may naturally lead into the rest.

Ms Hunter: Obviously, we have—well, look—

THE CHAIR: Just say no.

MS DUNDAS: No, let her answer the question.

Ms Hunter: Care and protection is critical. We need to get onto this one because, if we have damaged children and young people coming through, you know—

MRS CROSS: It does not matter.

Ms Hunter: Yes.

Ms Cahill: This actually links to the children's commissioner, and also legal rights.

MS DUNDAS: Yes. It is a hard question, but we know the budget is going to be incredibly tight. A number of these are long-term priorities, and some of them are short term. We are making hard decisions about priorities, so I thought I would share the blame.

MRS CROSS: Thank you for that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Ms Hunter: Thank you for your time today.

Short adjournment

MARGO MITCHELL and

JO BOWEN

were called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome to today's hearing. As you know, this is the budget consultation process. This committee is not going to make recommendations on specific figures to the government. We are looking at priorities and services. Our role is to make recommendations not decisions. To the folks who are recommending that we do X, sorry about that, we cannot do that. We can make recommendations to the Assembly, and through the Assembly to the government of the day, that they ought to do x.

These hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections, but also responsibilities. It means that you are protected from certain legal actions, such as being sued for defamation for what you say to us today. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell us the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter.

These proceedings are being broadcast through public service offices and throughout this building. The senior officers of the public service usually have this service available to them, so that they can actually start the work that is necessary as a result—they can get the jump.

I propose that we give you the opportunity to speak to us for five minutes or so, to kick it off, and then I will invite members to ask you questions. I am going to try to be tough. So far I have failed miserably, but I am going to try yet again. Before you start, please identify yourselves and the capacity in which you appear here for the record.

Ms Mitchell: I am Margo Mitchell, executive director, Belconnen Community Service.

Ms Bowen: I am Jo Bowen, director of community service, Belconnen Community Service.

Ms Mitchell: As you probably know, Belconnen Community Service provides a wide and comprehensive range of coordinated services in Belconnen, some of them ACT-wide, from family support, behaviour support and child care, through to volunteer services, services to people with a disability, and so on. It also provides community access and participation programs. We are there in Belconnen for the whole community, however, we especially target people who may be isolated, may have experienced family breakdown, may be unemployed, may have a low income, may have low levels of information and education, and whose families may experience violence.

As you know, Canberra can be a very hard place for people in those kinds of circumstances. We work very hard with people to develop resilience and community capacity, but we believe very firmly that, in order to do so, we must meet people's basic needs first. In our budget submission we have demonstrated the increased demand for the

services that we provide. Our approach is therefore a two-pronged one: top down, bottom up.

Top down: what we are suggesting is that there be a social plan for the ACT, that there be improved, coordinated community services that target the areas where there is most need. We are suggesting that organisations such as Belconnen Community Service can actually play a part in that. We work regionally. We have a lot of data on need. We can and do facilitate community forums, and we are in a position where, with resources, we could in fact analyse data, which could then inform planning for the ACT and provide a planned approach.

Bottom up: what we are also suggesting is an increase in resources with which the community sector can deliver services. We particularly want to focus on family support and early intervention. I will hand over to Jo to flesh that out.

Ms Bowen: It has been interesting hearing what has gone on before. All the people in front of us talked about the housing issue. Certainly, in relation to family support, housing is important. The Youth Coalition also mentioned emergency housing—crisis housing—especially in the Belconnen and Gungahlin regions, which is very difficult to access, not just for young people, but also for older people for whom abuse is an issue. It is very difficult for them to access alternative accommodation when they cannot afford private rental, which is the bottom line.

We are actually talking about families who are disadvantaged socially and financially, so the private rental market is just not an option. Even though they might not state it, a lot of agents are not interested in having single parents with children in their private accommodation. That is an ongoing issue.

THE CHAIR: You were talking about older people there, and I just wanted to know whether or not you were talking about violence in the family or whatever. What about elder abuse?

Ms Bowen: Yes. In a very particular situation that I am thinking of, there was definitely elder abuse.

THE CHAIR: That has an impact on housing, as well?

Ms Bowen: Yes, because they were sharing a house. The children were in the home. Where were the parents to go?

THE CHAIR: Yes, okay.

Ms Bowen: These were elderly parents who had actually invested all of their money in the child's family home.

THE CHAIR: That would make it difficult, wouldn't it? With young people, at least, if we have some alternative accommodation, even if it is in group housing, there is peer support and that sort of thing. With older people, that is a hell of a lot more difficult, I would imagine.

Ms Bowen: It is very difficult, yes.

THE CHAIR: You say there is not a gap in service, there is just no service.

Ms Bowen: There was nowhere for this elderly couple to go for that night, which was going to be safe for them, where they would not have to pay motel rates. There are some motels in the ACT that offer reasonable accommodation, but it is very restricted. Even then, we are looking at \$60 to \$70 a night, which is not easy for somebody on a pension to afford.

MRS CROSS: So the refuges do not accommodate them?

Ms Bowen: They do, but they are full.

THE CHAIR: Also, we could be talking about a married couple—

Ms Bowen: They are a married couple.

THE CHAIR: Where one of the partners is being abused by a child of that relationship, so they both leave for the protection of one of them. It is rare that refuges in town can take in married people.

Ms Bowen: Both sexes.

THE CHAIR: It is either men or women, isn't it?

Ms Bowen: That is right.

THE CHAIR: And separating them would be the worst possible thing you could do.

Ms Bowen: Yes.

THE CHAIR: That is a hole, isn't it.

Ms Bowen: It is, yes.

THE CHAIR: It is a big gap. Do you have any idea of the numbers?

Ms Bowen: I do not know off the top of my head, but I could certainly get that figure for you, yes.

THE CHAIR: Do you have a feel for it?

Ms Bowen: I am sorry.

THE CHAIR: Do you have a feel for the scale of it?

Ms Bowen: Probably one in 10, and I am looking at the Belconnen and Gungahlin regions.

MRS CROSS: One in 10 people?

Ms Bowen: Yes. Elderly couples.

MRS CROSS: Elderly couples?

Ms Bowen: Yes. They are experiencing abuse, particularly those people from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

MRS CROSS: It is one in 10 who cannot find somewhere to go if something occurs, is that right?

MS DUNDAS: Of elderly couples.

MRS CROSS: Yes, I understand that.

Ms Mitchell: Yes, looking for crisis accommodation, certainly.

THE CHAIR: I would appreciate it if you could get us some figures on that. That would be most helpful.

MRS CROSS: I would like to know how many as well, yes. That is a very important statistic.

Ms Bowen: I can only give you figures for Belconnen and Gungahlin.

THE CHAIR: That is okay. When you do that, would you be good enough to see whether you can direct us to other people who could give us perspectives on other parts of Canberra? If we are talking about one in 10 elderly people having crisis encounters, and there are no services, we have a serious issue on our hands.

Ms Bowen: The other regional community services would be a good source of information.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we might invite the other community services representatives who are about to appear at this committee to make a comment on this matter.

Ms Bowen: They could probably give you that information.

THE CHAIR: Sure. Thank you for that, I think.

Ms Bowen: You think, yes.

THE CHAIR: I am an old bloke and I have been abused by—

MS DUNDAS: It would be very nasty.

Ms Bowen: One of our concerns, certainly about family support, which was basically set up as an early intervention service to prevent families reaching a crisis point, is that because of the demand on the service now—certainly from Belconnen's perspective—

we are actually operating in a crisis situation. We used to be able to follow up with people within 48 hours of their contacting the service: now people are on a waiting list for three weeks before we can actually contact them. When we try to offer them alternatives in the meantime, we find that a lot of the other services are also unavailable. They either have long waiting lists or their books are closed.

So, families who are in crisis—and most of our concerns are about housing, financial and parenting issues—sometimes have to wait three weeks before they can actually have a worker to assist them with services, advocacy or whatever else they may need. We also have a strong behaviour management area, where we support families and work with children who have challenging behaviours. We have not picked up a new referral for that area since November, because of the demand on that service. My concern is that the Assembly is aware of the needs.

MS DUNDAS: Sorry, is that the Bungee service?

Ms Bowen: No, Bungee is the youth program running out of our service.

Ms Mitchell: This is behaviour support, which is funded through the Department of Education and Community Services.

Ms Bowen: There are four workers employed to work with children who have challenging behaviours.

MS DUNDAS: Okay, sure.

Ms Bowen: That is a very busy area, so we have not picked up new referrals since November. Often, when families get to that point, they have actually reached crisis point, and they can find it very disconcerting to be told that there is no-one available for the next three months.

THE CHAIR: I can see a domino effect happening here.

Ms Bowen: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. Mrs Cross, do you have a question?

MRS CROSS: No. I find the submission quite comprehensive, and I am quite satisfied, thank you.

MS DUNDAS: Do you see the immediate priority being in the area of family services?

Ms Bowen: Family support.

MS DUNDAS: That is dealing with families who are on the brink of crisis, be that through housing, financial—

Ms Bowen: Or parenting issues.

MS DUNDAS: Or parenting issues. Can you elaborate on what you mean by parenting issues?

Ms Bowen: Often the families cannot cope because of whatever reason, and sometimes it is the result of mental health problems the parents might be having. They may not have the energy, and some of them lack the skills or the information about ways to work with their own children, so they are looking for strategies to cope with their kids, whatever their behavioural problems might be.

THE CHAIR: There has been an upsurge in ADHD diagnoses, and the medical profession are fighting like blazes between themselves to figure out whether it exists or not. However, the parents of the kids who have had this behavioural problem do not have any doubt in their minds at all. Those people, I think, would fit into the category that you were just talking about, would they not? They are the ones that are reaching crisis as parents, because they do not know how to handle a situation that is atypical.

Ms Bowen: That is right, but I would say that they would be further along the continuum. They would be the families that the behaviour support area would pick up. Family support works to set up structures for family routines, such as teaching people how to encourage their children with homework: it is a bit more basic.

MS DUNDAS: Is there a trigger for those needing family support services, the families who have reached the point where they need to get external help? Is it losing a job?

Ms Bowen: Sometimes it can be domestic.

MS DUNDAS: Are there as many as three that you see as major?

Ms Bowen: I would say that family breakdown would be one, and domestic violence would perhaps be another.

Ms Mitchell: What we often see is families that are affected by multiple issues. We would rarely see a family where there is just one problem. It tends to be that there is one thing, almost like the straw that breaks the camel's back, that needs immediate attention, and then there are a series of underlying things.

MS DUNDAS: Do you have the funding in the services to be able to deal with the background problems, as well as the straw that broke the camel's back problem?

Ms Bowen: Absolutely, because often we would deal with that crisis issue first, and then we would work with the family on whatever might be underneath all that. That could be their parenting or it could be needing assistance on budgeting.

MRS CROSS: I do not see the answer to this in your submission, and I have neglected to ask: it says that there are five people on the waiting list for family support—does that fluctuate?

Ms Bowen: It does, yes.

MRS CROSS: What is the average time that people are on the waiting list?

Ms Bowen: Three weeks. It is actually seven.

MRS CROSS: I notice that the waiting list up here says that prospective clients with mainly complex needs must wait three weeks.

Ms Bowen: Yes.

MRS CROSS: However, is it three weeks for people in crisis, for example, if they have a housing issue or suicide problems?

Ms Bowen: No. I must say that we have an intake system, so that the person who actually makes that initial contact with the client would make a very quick assessment: is this a crisis situation where they need support right now, or within the next few days?

MRS CROSS: You prioritise them in order of need?

Ms Bowen: Absolutely. If someone was going to be evicted tomorrow morning, we would make sure somebody was there, and certainly suicide receives priority.

MRS CROSS: Thank you very much.

MS DUNDAS: No more questions. The submission was very detailed.

Ms Bowen: Thank you for the opportunity.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission. It was very helpful. Thank you, also, for raising the issue of housing for older people in crisis, because I think you have just opened a Pandora's box for us.

Ms Bowen: Do you wish me to give you the figures for the Belconnen and Gungahlin areas, and the names of any other services that it would be useful for you to contact?

THE CHAIR: Yes, if you can just direct us to where we need to go to check that information, we will check it.

Ms Bowen: We can do that. Thanks for your time.

MAUREEN CANE and

TONY CAMPBELL

were called.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. Welcome again, Maureen. I will not go through all this. You were here when I went through the spiel before. Just be aware that this is being broadcast through public service offices across the building.

I will invite you to make an opening statement. Before you do, would you mind identifying yourself and state the capacity in which you appear before the committee, for the purpose of Hansard?

Ms Cane: My name is Maureen Cane. I am the chief executive officer of Tuggeranong Community Service.

Mr Campbell: I am Tony Campbell. I am the manager of Supportlink Systems, which is a subsidiary company of Tuggeranong Community Service.

THE CHAIR: It is over to you, Maureen and Tony.

Ms Cane: Thank you very much for the opportunity to provide some comments to the standing committee. We appreciate the time you give us and the opportunity to raise issues with you. You have just heard from Belconnen Community Service. We are down at the other end of town, as it were.

THE CHAIR: God's own country!

Ms Cane: Exactly—in a beautiful valley. As we have noted in our submission, we are the largest of the regional community services. We operate from quite a number of sites, and have well over 200 people on our payroll. So we are actually one of the larger employers in Tuggeranong.

The programs we operate run from zero to 99, I suppose—if someone is 99. We run a range of child-care centres. We actually have four long-day-care centres and four occasional care centres. We have up to 12 before and after school care programs. So, if you are with me, the people are getting slightly older.

We run the Tuggeranong youth resources centre and family support, that you have just heard about. There are also behaviour management, guidance programs, case management, respite and transport—the whole gamut. We also operate the largest family day care program in Australia. There are over 1,400 children on our books and more than 230 carers. It is a very large program.

What we have decided to do in this submission, as you will see, is focus on two areas. One is to do with the aged, and the other is to do with young people, mainly between the ages of eight and 12. Although we have highlighted those two areas, that does not mean to say there are not other issues of equal concern. In fact, Belconnen has raised one of

them, and that is family support. We support everything that Belconnen would have said in that regard.

The two highlighted areas have been the subject of some research work that we have sought to undertake—some gathering of data. I might ask Tony to talk to the issues in rather more detail, since they come more within his purview.

Mr Campbell: Anyone who has been around the ACT for a while will know that, when Tuggeranong took off in the 1970s, for a number of years it was the fastest-growing area in Australia, and held that trophy pretty preciously. From the 1970s to now, it has expanded to about 30 percent of the ACT population. So our catchment area is quite large. The tag put on Tuggeranong at that point was ‘nappy valley’, and it was true; there were children everywhere. But, 30 years on, the demographics have changed.

Last year, I had a chat with Brendan Smyth about the major needs in Tuggeranong. I said to Brendan at the time, “The two areas that we see are the aged areas.” The aged area in Tuggeranong is at a critical point.

Unfortunately, Tuggeranong is still seen by many stakeholders as nappy valley. However, we have a rapidly growing aged population in Tuggeranong which is simply outstripping service provision.

Some of the situations that we are seeing are actually life and death—and that is not overstating it. Some of our programs will have people on the waiting list for up to a month. Sometimes, by the time we get to those people, they are dead. Our case managers would spend an enormous amount of time trying to drum up on-the-ground services for people. In fact, they would spend about 85 per cent of their time just trying to find somebody to go in and assist an aged person. This is what we began to see.

With our own programs, of course, we are flooded with people—and stretched. There are programs like community transport. In other regions, people are able to access community transport two or three times a week to get to doctors, go shopping and what have you. In Tuggeranong we had to reduce it to a maximum of one transportation per week. That was all we could do. Even then, we were holding people back—we were actually closing books, et cetera.

After the chat with Brendan last year, we undertook to do some statistical research on this whole area. From that research, we took something like 600 household surveys. They were not just posted out. We were phoning people across the whole of Tuggeranong. It was done reasonably well, actually. Perhaps I could read the main findings of that. Do you have those in front of you?

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Mr Campbell: I think one of the most significant findings is that 21 per cent of respondents said that either they, or their household, expected to be involved in directly supporting an aged person in Tuggeranong within the next five years. So there is pretty clear evidence that we have an increasing aged population.

Our biggest concern is that, Tuggeranong being such a large area, the need will not only surpass the current provision, but it will happen so rapidly that there will be many people who will simply miss out on on-the-ground service. That on-the-ground service might be someone coming in to install a grab-rail in the shower recess, to stop the person from falling, or it might be the provision of meals on wheels, housing or whatever. There are often critical situations. We would like to present that as a significant trend.

THE CHAIR: I agree with you, it is quite a misnomer—the way in which the valley is viewed. People do not realise that 30 years have passed—and, also, older people are moving in. The top end of the valley is not far from turning over the same way Narrabundah did some time ago.

There is a shortage of older persons' accommodation, even though I don't think it is as critical as it may be in other parts of town. One of my worries about a huge upsurge in that is the lack of accompanying services. The intention of both colours of government—and Commonwealth governments—over the last few years has been to keep people in their own homes and prevent them from going into nursing homes. They want to restructure people's homes so they can keep their own family units, but that is not without its costs in supportive services.

Is there a very real danger that we—the community—will come up with a housing strategy which will address the issue of older persons' accommodation but find that we do not have the services to support it? In other words, are we seeing a gap in service provision now—before it happens? What feel do you have for that kind of thing?

Mr Campbell: Our research shows a strong willingness of people within Tuggeranong to support their parents and grandparents. That is clear in the research here. The majority of people—I think it is 88 per cent—have said that for them to do so, they will require additional outside support services to assist them in their caring. You have those figures in front of you. That is a strong indication that community support will be required to do it successfully.

Ms Cane: As noted in our written submission, there are a number of positive, not particularly expensive, things that can be done to prevent elderly people becoming burdens to themselves, or to others, before their time, such as the attendance of community nurses—social functions.

At the moment, we run three different respite groups. There is a community nurse who visits one person for an hour per fortnight. Even that is very helpful. Probably, with a little redistribution of resources, far more of that sort of assistance could be rendered across Canberra. That would be a really helpful and practical way of assisting older people.

Tony has mentioned community transport, which uses volunteer assistance. We see a definite increase in the need for that, so people can get around, and live life. People don't just need roofs over their heads. That is very important but, after that, what do they do? People need to be able to go to social things—and education. Our society should be able to assist to provide all those positive sorts of things—not necessarily all completely free. It is those things that we are concerned about, and we think there is quite a lot that could be done without enormously increased costs.

Another thing we mention is more work being put into falls-prevention programs. I am aware, for example, of excellent programs put on by the YMCA, which cost something like \$2,000 for an eight-week course. They are tiny amounts of money, really, but what that can save over time in the health budget is enormous.

A sense of self-worth and confidence in older people is wonderful to see. I know a bit about it personally. That is the sort of thing where we think we should be able to use our imagination a bit more.

THE CHAIR: We have been talking about having falls-prevention programs since Pontius was a trainee pilot. I can recall falls-prevention programs when I was running rehab and aged care. Is it time we stopped talking about it and actually did something about it?

Ms Cane: It is time we did a bit more. Yes, I think so. As I said, we are not talking huge amounts of money here. There are organisations—not ours, necessarily—that could facilitate this. They could put them on, in consultation with nursing homes, aged and third-age groups. All kinds of things are quite possible.

THE CHAIR: That is an interesting recommendation you just made, an almost off-the-cuff one, about the role of community support services, like community nursing. All too often we concentrate on the crises areas. In the prevention area, half a dozen people will gather, in the presence of someone who will guide the quality of life, as opposed to repairing it. That seems to be what you are talking about.

Ms Cane: Yes. About 80 people turn up to our singalong at the Southern Cross Club, where the community nurse comes. She will go around and take this one's blood pressure and talk to that one. She makes sure they can be linked in with a GP or whatever it is. All these sorts of everyday, practical, things can make a great deal of difference to somebody's wellbeing.

THE CHAIR: Did that come up in the health summit?

Ms Cane: Well, it did.

THE CHAIR: I do not recall that it came up in big lights.

Ms Cane: I mentioned it, didn't I?

MRS CROSS: You did, you mentioned it.

Ms Cane: It is one of my beefs, because I think we could do a lot more.

THE CHAIR: You mentioned it on the first day, but I did not know whether it was followed up.

Ms Cane: No, I do not think it was not pursued. It is not elaborate, it is really on-the-ground, everyday stuff.

MS DUNDAS: The Belconnen Community Service people mentioned that there seems to be an amazing amount of elder abuse, and a lack of services for those experiencing such. Is there a similar situation in Tuggeranong, even though we have positive numbers saying they will look after their parents and older people in the community? Have you seen similar statistics to what they were talking about?

Mr Campbell: Yes. Interestingly, children are often under a misapprehension about the extra burden there will be when they bring mum or dad in to begin to care for them. You know, it becomes idealistic, and they do not really think out the full consequences. I am not trying to say they should not do that—in fact, quite the opposite. The experience we have seen is where children have brought their parents in from interstate—there is a large proportion expected to be coming to Tuggeranong—and a smaller number have come from overseas.

Often, parents move in with a certain amount of resource. You know, they have sold a home in Sydney or moved from England or somewhere. There is temptation to abuse that resource. There are situations with which I am very familiar. I have seen times when the kids have said, “Well, look, we really could do with a bigger home now.” Mum says, “All right. There’s \$200,000.”

They build a big home and then, three months later, realise it is a bit hard having mum around. So they encourage mum to go into a retirement village or nursing home. In some situations I have seen, they have literally kept mum locked indoors. They have kept mum locked in one room. Mum is not allowed to eat with the family and the family will not do any ironing or shopping for her.

Those are situations you do not hear of every day. However, you hear them frequently enough to realise that you are probably catching just the tip of the iceberg. You realise there is a lot more abuse happening out there than we, as a community, would like to think actually would happen.

THE CHAIR: The extent of physical abuse would be a little more obvious than the psychological abuse, wouldn’t it?

Mr Campbell: It seems to be more financial, John.

MRS CROSS: They’d be tied in together, though. One leads to the other.

THE CHAIR: Yes, they would be.

Mr Campbell: There are no contracts. Families do not tend to have legal frameworks and what have you. Often, elderly parents are very reluctant to take any form of action because it is against their own kids.

THE CHAIR: Thank you.

Ms Cane: Moving on to the other aspect, which is at the other end of the age spectrum, several of our services for children and families involve behavioural management. Belconnen did mention this, but we would also like to raise it with you.

Again, we are not talking huge resources here. We are talking, I suppose, about commitment, and thought, trying to assist parents, teachers and child-care workers with behavioural management issues—starting very young.

In fact, we put this into our submission after a discussion, the other day, with the person who runs our school-age care program—before and after school. She said she was hearing, from a couple of the programs, that the biggest issue for our child-care workers in the before and after school programs is behaviour management. Poorly behaved children, some of whom have been very disruptive during the school day, come to the after school care program. We are trying to work in with schools to do something about that. We think there is quite a lot more that may need to be done which, again, is really of an early intervention nature.

Mr Campbell: In support of what Maureen has said, we run the behaviour guidance program for the ACT—or one of them. Resources across the ACT are fairly scarce in this area, and yet it is a growing area. The problem of parents finding it difficult to manage their children is growing considerably.

Schools tend to have a response to that but, once again, we are in a situation where the problems outstrip resources in the schools. If you go from the schools into the broader community—because not everyone is plugged-in to primary school or pre-school—there are hardly any resources out there.

There is clear research that links behavioural difficulties at an early age to young people going into criminal activity later. Although Australia has not done a lot of research in this area, in fact overseas countries have. We believe investment into the area of behavioural management is absolutely worth it.

MS DUNDAS: You might not be able to answer this, but why do we have a growing need in this area? I mean is it just that the population is growing and the percentage of children with behavioural problems has stayed the same, or are we not supporting parents well? Is it because of overcrowding in classes? Can you point at something and say, “This is a cause of why we have a growing problem with behavioural management in young people”?

Mr Campbell: You could probably get about 30 different things and throw them into the one pot. It is very difficult to say it is just one thing or another, or it is mainly this or mainly that. It just seems to be that that is the pot. Many families are stressed out, not knowing exactly where to go. They are embarrassed to take their children out socially, et cetera. We would not have brought this to the table unless we saw this as a major trend.

I am responsible for the referral management system called Supportlink Systems. We receive referrals from the police and GPs from all over the ACT. The topic referred most is parent issues around behaviour management. So it is something experienced by sectors all over the place—right across Canberra.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission. You have added to our storehouse of knowledge. You have pointed us in a couple of directions we did not realise we would be going down. Thank you.

Ms Cane: Thank you.

THERESE QUINN,

KASY CHAMBERS and

LEONIE WHYTE

were called.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming. I will go through this little spiel very briefly. You know this is part of the budget consultation process, et cetera. You've been here before, Kasy.

Ms Chambers : No, I have not.

THE CHAIR: We are looking at priorities of service delivery. We are not about deciding on whether people will get X or Y. The decision-making process rests with the government, who are accountable to the Assembly for their decisions. Our role is to recommend to them areas on which they might like to concentrate their thinking and resources. So we are not a decision-making body.

You should be aware that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, protected by privilege. Therefore, if you say something for which you may be sued for defamation, you will be covered by privilege. But that carries responsibility also. We have to be responsible about what is said—and the truth, and all that stuff. The lights there indicate that the proceedings are being broadcast through this building and to senior public service offices. So do not be too shy.

I will offer you five minutes to open the discussion up, and then we will flick to the members to ask you questions. I will be as tough on you as I have been on everybody else! Before we start, would you please identify yourselves for Hansard. When the record is done, they will know who you are, and the capacity in which you appear before the committee.

Ms Quinn: I am Therese Quinn, I am acting program manager of the YWCA family housing outreach service.

Ms Chambers : I am Kasy Chambers, I am the executive director of the YWCA of Canberra.

Ms Whyte: I am Leonie Whyte, I am the research and policy officer for the YWCA of Canberra.

Ms Chambers : I think most of you know about the Y. Just to give you some context, we run services across the age range in various areas across the ACT. There are various types of child-care services, youth services, community development, suicide intervention, child health, nutrition and family housing. That was very brief.

To introduce our submission, normally I would be very happy to sit here and talk about preventative, universally targeted and early intervention strategies, particularly around families and children, and particularly around the children's strategy for the ACT or a family strategy—those sorts of ideas.

However, it is very difficult for us to talk preventatively when we are aware, through one of our service areas, of the high need for housing. It is very difficult to imagine a more necessary early intervention service than getting roofs over people's heads. So, normally, we would not target-in on that, but our experience in running medium term crisis accommodation for families has highlighted for us an area of huge need in the ACT. That is one of the areas of our submission.

The other area we chose to highlight was the community sector itself. We want to talk about the necessity for a strong third sector that is well resourced, and able to provide services to the people of the ACT.

I gather you have our submission in front of you. Talking firstly about housing, we are shocked at the number of people being turned away from our crisis and outreach services. I will hand over to Therese, in a moment, to talk about that area.

What concerns us is the fact that we have very few exit points from that housing, so we are not moving people on, as we would like to do. There are very few vacancies in the private housing market. The public housing stock is getting smaller, more difficult to get to and also deteriorating in quality. We are aware that some of the housing stock is reaching the end of its current life, and that that is going to exacerbate the situation. I wanted to introduce that idea. However, I want to get Therese to speak, because she is the person who has had to turn away 192 families.

Ms Quinn: There are two main things I want to add to that. The term "housing crisis" has been used in relation to Canberra at the moment. The experience of the service I work at is that that is very much the case.

We are seeing longer and longer waiting times for families to get into emergency housing through ACT Housing. Those are families that are, through an assessment process, deemed to be in urgent need of housing. They are families that are homeless, or at risk of homelessness, that are living in a variety of dangerous and unsafe situations. They are families with young children, they are families that virtually have nowhere else to go. We are limited in the sense that we have seven medium-term properties where families can stay for up to 12 months.

As far as I am aware, there is no service here in the ACT that can respond immediately to the crisis accommodation needs of a female and male couple, with or without children. We have our gender-specific refuges—but, otherwise, there is nothing. This was raised by Belconnen Community Services. I guess I would like to support everything they said along those lines.

THE CHAIR: Before you go on, you mentioned couples with or without children. Belconnen actually targeted-in on older couples. Do I detect from you that the age bit does not matter—it is just across the board?

Ms Quinn: It is.

THE CHAIR: If you have a couple in crisis, there is nowhere for them. If they are single they can go to one of each, and meet at lunchtime, but bad luck if they want to—

Ms Quinn: Exactly, yes. That is the position we are put in. We advise people that, due to a lack of alternative options, one possible way of managing their immediate crisis is to temporarily split and go into separate refuges. For a family in crisis—whatever that crisis may be—that is a really unattractive option, because the support they offer each other during that crisis is essential.

THE CHAIR: Of course, they would make a really good decision if there were kids involved. You would take one each, I suppose. Then you would get into the normal trouble with that. What kind of split would there be between couples with kids and couples without kids?

Ms Quinn: With our service, you have to have dependant children to be eligible.

THE CHAIR: Presumably, the couples without kids would be in the turn-away rate.

Ms Quinn: No, our turn-away statistics are collected on families who are eligible for service provision whose accommodation needs we cannot meet. We also collect separate statistics on families who contact us that are not eligible, but our main contacts are families with children.

THE CHAIR: So, in town, where would somebody find out? Let us say you have a couple, who are 29 years old, without kids, who go into this sort of crisis. How would you know how many there were? You would not know, because they would not come knocking on your door. They would, if they had kids.

Ms Quinn: Yes, we do have some. By no means would we see all of them, because a lot of people would know before contacting us.

THE CHAIR: That might be a rhetorical question that has to raise its head. Thanks for that.

Ms Chambers: That is our first issue—housing. I do not know if anybody else wants to ask Therese any questions on that. We can come back to it.

MRS CROSS: Perhaps you can talk about your issues very quickly and then, when you have finished, we will ask you some questions.

Ms Chambers: The second issue is really around the strengths, and the resilience, of community services in order to service people.

We use tendering. We feel there is some fine-tuning to the tendering process that we can do. This particular one is not about money, it is more about strategy, in terms of ensuring that we are able to learn stuff through the tendering process—that we are able to innovate. For example, the YWCA currently runs two pilot projects.

It is very difficult to innovate in a tendering environment. It is also quite difficult to get bottom-up information and have service design coming from services which are in touch with people—or from people who are, themselves, in need. So I am wanting to talk about some fine-tuning to the tendering process, looking for non-negotiable evaluation, tied to large projects that are owned by the government and therefore the people of the ACT, so that that learning can be tracked—and also some money around innovation in the tendering area.

I also want to look at some of the areas in the community sector, which is just sort of slipping and slipping—through being in old buildings and not being able to keep up with wage increases. I will perhaps look at indexation of more than the CPI rate for services, because of the high degree of staff costs involved there.

MS DUNDAS: On the point of the need for better strategy and better resourcing for community services, I have heard—I cannot remember where; maybe I heard it earlier in these briefings—that more and more people are being turned away, just because the facilities are not there to deal with them, the staffing hours are not there and the increased reporting means there is less time to deal with them. Do you have any evidence of that? Do you want to elaborate on those concerns? This is separate from the need for strategic thinking. I heard a statistic, that we are losing, I think, 100 people a month because we cannot get in contact with them.

MRS CROSS: That was Tuggeranong.

MS DUNDAS: That was Tuggeranong?

Ms Chambers: I think we do need a level of accountability. I think that, on the whole, tendering has brought that accountability, so we should not lose that. However, I think there is a need to make sure that the type of accounting data matches what we are actually doing on the ground, so that the outputs required by contracts match the desired outcomes. A lot of our frustrations lie in trying to meet reporting data. While there needs to be some accountability, it needs to be recognised that that accountability comes at the cost of client contact hours. I cannot give you any direct figures on that.

Ms Quinn: The only thing I can add to that is that the outreach component of our service has been closed for most of the last eight months, which has not happened in the past. That has been due to a whole range of issues—mainly resource-based issues. We simply were not able to meet the level of demand for outreach support for families who are homeless.

MRS CROSS: Because of time, I am going to ask just one question. This is probably unfair, but I am going to follow in Roslyn's footsteps on this one. If I were to ask you to prioritise the No 1 burning issue that you would like to see addressed from what you have given us, what is that issue?

Ms Chambers: It is probably one that we have not actually touched on—that is public housing. Although we have talked about crisis housing, crisis housing is a short-term issue. That is not somewhere any family wants to end up. No family wants to be in the situation Therese is talking about, of taking children around and asking to be split up. Public housing is probably the only long-term answer. We will always need crisis

accommodation, but if we have enough public housing, then crisis accommodation can be purely that—a short-term buffer between being homeless and being housed.

MRS CROSS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: You were talking about that before—the exit opportunities from crisis housing. A person turns up on the doorstep, bang. You say, “Okay, we can fix you up for three weeks. We are now going to create some structures for you to get your life back together. Off you go.” Then they say “Yes—where?” And that is the problem.

Ms Chambers: It is very difficult. The private market is not available to us. Often, the community housing sector is not available to clients exiting SAAP. The only real option for clients exiting SAAP options is public housing.

THE CHAIR: We box things into crisis accommodation, public housing and community housing. They are all neatly boxed so we can say, “There is something wrong here, not enough money has gone into this, that and the other.” Do you think the seam is too thick, that the transition from one to the other should be a little more seamless? There is no connection with the outcomes and creating the demand for the second one—and on we go. That seems to be part of the problem.

Ms Chambers: There is certainly a difficulty in that process. There are better ways to address this. In that process, we deal with Commonwealth funding, ACT funding for SAAP, housing policy under the ACT government—and we deal with urban services with regard to the provision of ACT housing. Just off the top of my head, we are dealing with four bodies, probably, in the process of six to eight weeks, which is always difficult.

THE CHAIR: After you have worked all that out, then you can solve the problem of the people that have landed on your doorstep.

Ms Chambers: Possibly.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much.

Ms Chambers: Thank you for your time.

JULIE WHITMORE and

EDUARD DUYVAN

were called.

THE CHAIR: Both of my colleagues have other engagements, so we'll be a little bit ruthless. If you feel that you need to further submit to the committee, we would invite you to do that. You've all heard the spiel. I won't go into that. Just remember that the lights are on and we're being recorded for the broadcast. Please be aware of that. I invite you to make a submission. Tell us your names please and the capacity in which you appear before the committee, for the purposes of Hansard.

Ms Whitmore: I'm Julie Whitmore. I'm the administrator at Welfare Rights and Legal Centre. I've been there since 1990.

Mr Duyvan: My name is Eduard Duyvan. I am a caseworker for the Welfare Rights and Legal Centre.

THE CHAIR: Welcome. Over to you.

Ms Whitmore: The issues in our submission that we're going to address with you today are very consistent with the issues that you've just dealt with from the previous people. The two issues we want to talk about are the continued financial support of community services, particularly in relation to the SACS award, and public housing. I'll talk about the SACS award and Eduard will talk about public housing.

We stress the crisis in community services generally in the ACT in meeting ongoing costs in a climate where there have been very few growth funds over the past 10 years and where there have been significant increases in costs largely due to the SACS award coming into being. The award is a wonderful thing. We don't want to criticise that, but it has had a big financial impact on organisations. From our experience, it's a significant impact. So we want the government to commit to meeting the costs of the SACS award now and into the future and not to cut back in any way the salary levels that they're currently funding, despite what might be happening with the SACS award and the changing of that award from a paid rates award to a minimum rates award, which will possibly reduce the salary levels. It's still yet to be decided, but we want to stress that that shouldn't mean any cut in funding for organisations. We struggle now to get the staff we need to operate our service. We've currently got a position that we just can't fill. A lot of the problem is that we can't offer the salary levels that the private sector and government, which are our direct opposition, can and that's a problem.

I could talk about how the government is trying to fund the SACS award—

THE CHAIR: I think it can do that on its own behalf, don't you?

Ms Whitmore: They have given some one-off interim funding which falls short of increased recurrent funding. I know that there is a process in train to look at what they call the translation and the costing of the impact of the SACS award. I would put it that

it's a bit late for the translation to be looked at, because the award was common ruled in 1997. If people haven't already translated to the award, then they are in breach of their contracts, so I wonder why the government is spending money on a process looking at the translation. The translation process is a part of the award. Schedule D of the award explains how that process is to take place. I'm not sure why money is being spent on looking at that but it is. It seems that the increase for recurrent funding is being held up while that process happens.

THE CHAIR: That puts it fairly well. I'm sure when the government reads the *Hansard* of this committee they will digest it and do the right thing.

Mr Duyvan: I want to talk about housing. We tried to summarise the nature of the issue in our submission. The first priority in our submission in regard to housing is that there is no solution to the housing problem we have at the moment, except for the community to find more resources to put into housing. I heard you mention a little while ago that we have separate programs to deal with different sets of issues and different groups of people. There seems to be no simple transition of people from one group to the other. The problem is simply that there are no places available for people to go through. Getting them into public housing becomes so difficult.

A large number of people who can't get in can't find a place in the private rental market, because it's unaffordable. The ACT housing rental market is now the second most expensive in the whole country. While we need a new type of housing policy, it doesn't look as if housing policy will solve the housing needs of 3,000 people waiting on the public housing waiting list in the ACT at the moment. About 500 of the applicants on that list are waiting for an urgent allocation. These people need housing urgently. We can try to establish a statistical figure to identify these needs, but these people can't wait that long.

I will leave it at that and answer any questions the committee might have.

THE CHAIR: I think we've got a fairly common thread coming through all of the submissions. We would probably only be going over old ground if we pursued that. Your point is well taken, particularly the point about being the second most expensive one in the country.

MS DUNDAS: You raised in your written submission the need for an indigenous woman's legal service and a community legal centre, both of which I agree are areas of need. Do you also feel that there is a need for legal services for young people?

Ms Whitmore: I just want to clarify the community legal centre. That's the community legal centre funding program.

THE CHAIR: That would be considered by the Legal Affairs Standing Committee. All members are invited to attend that committee, where we would have more time to explore that in some depth.

MRS CROSS: So we shouldn't ask any questions on that, Mr Chair? Is that what you're saying?

MS DUNDAS: Can't we get an answer, please?

THE CHAIR: You can get an answer.

MS DUNDAS: We had a discussion earlier today about youth services.

THE CHAIR: I just don't want the answer to be too long, because it will be out of order.

MS DUNDAS: Simply, in five words or less.

Ms Whitmore: We are engaged in discussion with relevant people in the community about that need, and we don't feel we're in a position to make any formal comment at this stage.

MRS CROSS: This applies not only to this question but to anything we're going to be assessing regarding funding and any recommendations we're going to make. In your submission you've suggested a women's legal service, but you've also suggested other things. Is it a matter of starting a new service specific to a demographic, or is it perhaps more practical to have better trained lawyers in the existing services to address all those other categories?

Ms Whitmore: If you're talking about the indigenous women's legal centre proposal—

MRS CROSS: Yes.

Ms Whitmore: The proposal is to set up a committee to look at the need and to look at the best way to address the level of need. We're not set on what is the best way.

MRS CROSS: I understand. Thank you for that.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submissions.

MARIE BENNETT and

FIONA MAY

were called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome. I'm sorry to have kept you for so long. You've heard the preliminary stuff, so we won't go down that track, and you know about the lights and broadcast? Can I ask you to indicate your name and the capacity in which you appear before the committee, for the purposes of Hansard? Then I'll invite you to make an opening submission, and then we'll get into it.

Ms Bennett: My name is Marie Bennett. I am the Executive Director of Lifeline Canberra Inc.

Mrs May: My name is Fiona May. I'm a project development officer for Lifeline.

THE CHAIR: You're going to give us an opening statement, Marie?

Ms Bennett: Yes.

THE CHAIR: You have given copies of your submission to other standing committees, I would hope.

Ms Bennett: We have indeed. We have also submitted a similar submission to the Standing Committee on Health.

THE CHAIR: Wonderful. That's great. We can jump over those, because if you appear before those committees any interested members of this committee can also appear there, and we can explore those cases in greater depth. Over to you.

Ms Bennett: Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to you this afternoon and to tell you something more about our submission. In the time I have this afternoon, there are four key points I'd like to make, mostly about our submission for a face-to-face crisis counselling service.

Firstly, I'd like to say that Lifeline is a reputable organisation that has served the Canberra community for over 30 years through the provision of a 24-hour crisis telephone counselling service. We have a proud reputation, and we seek to continue to work out of that reputation.

Last year we took over 11,000 calls, which were competently and expertly dealt with by our 180 volunteer counsellors. We do this every year on a limited budget which is supported by the government to the tune of 40 per cent. We depend on the generosity of the community for the other 60 per cent of our funding. The need for this core service continues to grow, and Lifeline depends on the continued support of the ACT government.

From the front line that we have with our telephone services, and in responding to community concerns, we have identified a gap in community services. There are no face-to-face crisis counselling services in Canberra. In any given week we would refer 20 callers to other generalist counselling services. They are usually faced with a two to six-week delay before their first appointment. For people in crisis this is too long to wait.

The waiting time for existing services tells its own story. It indicates that the demand for counselling is greater than can be met by the existing supply. The answer, however, is simply not to fund another counselling service which over time would develop its own long waiting list. The answer is to design a service that takes the pressure off the existing services and allows them to do what they do best—offer quality, in-depth or specialised counselling to people with medium to long-term needs in a timely way.

The model of a short-term crisis counselling service, as outlined in our submission, is in line with the model proposed by Professor Nick Glasgow at the recent government-sponsored health summit. This is a model of competent generalists providing community health services and referring to specialist services only when necessary. After consultation with Professor Glasgow, we propose to offer a face-to-face counselling service that does fit within his model.

Our crisis service would be open to anyone in crisis. They would have access to immediate short-term support. Our counselling staff would be competent generalists able to assist with the common and usual causes of crises. They would refer to the specialist and medium-term counselling services those people who had a specific need for this additional assistance. By offering a crisis counselling service we would assist people to resolve crises before they became long-term entrenched issues or escalating problems. We are the service best disposed to fill this gap, in line with Professor Glasgow's model of competent generalists.

Fourthly, the service we suggest will provide short-term crisis counselling and will not duplicate or be in competition with any other service currently operating in the Canberra region. Mental health services are available only to people with fairly severe mental health problems. Currently the main avenue of support available to people with mild to moderate mental health problems is medication from their GP or our crisis line.

We know that crisis intervention can stop the escalation of mental health problems. Access to crisis services for these people would take the pressure off the existing mental health services. The current providers of low-cost generalist counselling services recognise the need for, and support the introduction of, a crisis face-to-face counselling service.

In conclusion, Lifeline is the logical choice to provide immediate, accessible, low-cost face-to-face counselling to those people in current crisis in order to attend to their immediate need and to forestall these people becoming regular long-term users of an already overwhelmed community mental health infrastructure.

MRS CROSS: I take my hat off to Lifeline. I've known a lot of people who have used Lifeline and benefited from it greatly. They're still around, so that's a good thing.

Ms Bennett: It is indeed.

MRS CROSS: I wanted to talk about the mental health aspect. As you know, the department of health has a number of services and support mechanisms in place to help people with mental health problems. Not all of them are severe mental health problems. Some of them are preventive measures rather than curative. Would what you're offering to do compete with what the department of health is doing? If not, how would it differ? How would you set yourself apart? How do you differentiate what you would offer?

Ms Bennett: I don't believe that it would compete with the mental health crisis team and the services from that area. We're talking about those people who are in immediate crisis—sometimes it's mental health crisis—who can be seen and, put crudely, dealt with in the space of one, two, three, maybe up to five sessions. Those are the kinds of people who do not have access to mental health crisis team services.

We've had experiences of our telephone counsellors wanting to consult with the mental health crisis team being on wait for up to 40 minutes to an hour. They can't talk to the mental health crisis workers. That's an overwhelmed service already. We believe we would take some of the pressure off that by being able to say to our callers whom we assess need some crisis support that they can see somebody at Lifeline tomorrow, rather than sit on the phone for an hour tonight to Mental Health.

A large number of our callers, when we offer the mental health crisis team as a referral, will say, "They won't take me. I'm not severe enough. I'm not considered to be within their target criteria group." That is an area where we believe we wouldn't be in conflict with them.

MRS CROSS: If there is such a demand, as you say, and the mental health crisis service cannot cater to that demand because of either numbers or the criteria that are used to assess whether they service somebody, don't you think that you would be burdened as well? I look at your recommendation and what you'd like. It's almost like saying, "How long is a piece of string?" If we say, "Great, let's do it," would it be enough? Would you also be turning people away simply because you can't cater to the numbers?

Ms Bennett: With the funding we have requested, we believe two people would be able to handle the kinds of numbers we're talking about which come through our crisis service already.

MRS CROSS: And what are those numbers, Marie?

Ms Bennett: Twenty a week. These would be people whom we would have referred on to other services but who may be better able to be supported by a crisis intervention service.

MRS CROSS: Of the 20, can you give me the gender and age group, roughly?

Ms Bennett: I can't give you a gender or an age group. It would be right across the spectrum. That's an average number. Sometimes it would be more, sometimes less, depending on the number of calls we would have coming in. Of those 20, one-third—that would be six or seven—would be experiencing thoughts of suicide.

MRS CROSS: The reason you can't is what?

Ms Bennett: It's just too difficult to pin down with 11,000 callers in a year.

THE CHAIR: I get the funny feeling that mental health conditions defined under the Mental Health Act as being treatable are not going to be the subject of the majority of calls to Lifeline. They would be about societal crises involving people in despair. Once they've got some sort of succour, some support and some external strength, they would have the capability to fix themselves.

Ms Bennett: Absolutely.

THE CHAIR: What I'm hearing you say is that the telephone service is not enough and that you need face-to-face counselling. In years gone by people would see their parish priest, doctor, local copper or whoever. A problem shared is a problem halved.

Ms Bennett: You can very quickly establish a set of strategies that will help people.

THE CHAIR: Which you can't see when you're in crisis, because you can't see the wood for the trees.

Ms Bennett: That's right, yes.

THE CHAIR: What I'm detecting coming out of your submission here is that it's a predominantly different clientele altogether.

Ms Bennett: This is not necessarily about mental health, and that's why we have chosen to highlight it here. This is about people who are experiencing relationship breakdown, trouble with their children, parenting issues—people who are in crisis within relationships. These are the people we would refer to generalist counselling services that are already overwhelmed and have long waiting periods. These people need someone today.

THE CHAIR: So you're talking about a stabilising and a transit station for people from the time they want to leap off the cliff to the time when they can say, "I've got it together now. I can go and see someone."

Ms Bennett: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Yes, we understand. Thank you very much for that.

JACQUELINE PEARCE and

WINSOME WILLOW

were called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome. You guys know the drill. We'll just get you to identify yourselves and the capacity in which you appear before the committee. I'll invite you to make a submission and members will then ask you some questions.

Ms Pearce: My name is Jacqui Pearce. I am the Director of Toora Women Inc. I'm here today representing ACT Women's Services.

Ms Willow: I'm Winsome Willow, the Manager of Inanna Inc. I'm also here representing ACT Women's Services.

Ms Pearce: We'll make a brief opening statement. There's just a couple of things we'd like to add. Then it's probably useful to allow the time for questions. We made a point about services for indigenous children, but it's important to make a broader point about children who are currently witnessing domestic violence. Most of the women and children's refuges, as well as the refuges for women unaccompanied by children, are seeing third or fourth generation people coming through their refuges. One of the critical areas of need is work with children, particularly those children who have lived, experienced and witnessed domestic violence.

Ms Willow: Domestic violence crisis services have been looking at their stats, and the number of boys who are now perpetrators of violence against either mothers or parents has increased in the last few years in the client group. There's been an increase in those as a client group getting attention. The response you would normally give to adult partners is not appropriate when it's a teenage son. Their mechanisms are not working very well. They've collected stats which they would be happy to give you.

MS DUNDAS: So this is the area of need for children who are abusing their parents after seeing their parents abuse each other?

Ms Willow: Yes, there are issues of that and then also—

Ms Pearce: There's a prevention issue for the young kids. If there were more services and support for children who are escaping domestic violence and who have witnessed that, then perhaps we wouldn't be seeing the sons continue that cycle. The cycle of violence and homelessness is now continuing from generation to generation, and many of us are seeing the daughters of the mothers we saw a few years ago. That's increasing. We are now seeing third or fourth generations in our services.

THE CHAIR: You said that the daughters are following the mothers and it won't be long before the grand-daughters will be following the daughters following the mothers. Is it the sons following the fathers or is it the fathers being responsible for both of the generations?

MRS CROSS: It's either abusive parent, isn't it? It is learned behaviour.

THE CHAIR: I'm not restricting it to that. I'm trying to see whether or not there's a generational match.

Ms Pearce: I'm not sure that we would have the statistics to say definitely, but if you live in a family where you witness and experience domestic violence—and generally the stats to date are that the majority of perpetrators are males—I suppose sons learn behaviour from their male parent's behaviour. It's not in all cases, but it is in the majority of cases, and it's generally the mothers and the children escaping that violence.

MS DUNDAS: We've already had some people before us today talking about an increase in behavioural problems in children generally, but we're talking about a subset of those who have easily identifiable specific causes for their behaviour. That is the area you are talking about?

Ms Pearce: Yes. With homelessness, there's violence but there's often a lot of other factors. There might be issues of chemical use, there might be mental health issues or there could be a range of other factors. That's certainly true for most of the people we would see, as well as the issues they bring from their family of origin, whether it be sexual abuse, domestic violence, emotional abuse or poverty. They're all factors contributing to people staying in this cycle.

THE CHAIR: Earlier we were talking about elder abuse and housing. It seems to me that a lot of the people who present to your services will be married women with younger children.

Ms Willow: No, not necessarily in our service.

Ms Pearce: Nor ours.

THE CHAIR: That's what I want to explore with you. How many of them are women who have put up with this sort of nonsense and when the kids have gone they've said enough is enough and left.

Ms Willow: Quite a lot. We have both women with children and single women, and we have quite a lot of older women. We don't have very good property settlement outcomes for older women. They don't have enough money to buy another place and sometimes are not eligible for an allocation. They just want to leave. They don't care what he does. They don't care if he keeps the house. That doesn't make a difference to those sorts of things. We have a lot of older women, and a lot of them return to the home after time out and say, "That's the best three months I had" or "That's the best six months I had." We are not getting very good outcomes.

THE CHAIR: From reports to me, what you do well is restore the power women were born with. Self-esteem is an integral part of that personal power. Do you find it harder to restore that in the older women than in the middle aged group, or is there not much difference?

Ms Willow: I don't think it's harder.

THE CHAIR: Which ones have the greater give-up rate?

Ms Willow: They have got quite a lot of grace in dealing with adversity in their lives. These women aren't what you would consider victims in that sense. They have quite a lot of life experience. Give them half a chance and they take their life back. Anybody given safety and a roof over their head that doesn't involve violence usually does pretty well.

THE CHAIR: You were saying earlier that the older ones are likely to go back into their home and say, "That was a good three months."

Ms Pearce: We would see some of that but for women across the board, often older women, particularly if they have mental health problems or some additional factor, there's a pull back to the violent partner because they can't survive on their own.

MRS CROSS: Because of addictive personality, for some of them.

Ms Pearce: There might be long-term low benzo use, for instance, and mental health issues. They are critical factors for women feeling that perhaps they can't make it on their own and going back. Yes, we do have a significant number of older women, particularly from non-English speaking backgrounds, who wait till the kids have gone and then finally make the break.

MS DUNDAS: In your submission you recommend outreach workers. Do you see the need for exit strategies and ongoing support? Besides outreach workers, what else is needed? Can you elaborate on that?

Ms Pearce: Outreach workers would make a huge difference for women not having to return to crisis accommodation for relapse prevention for an alcohol/drug issue or a mental health issue, or a combination of both. One of the things we see with many women and women with children is that after a period of time a crisis will occur around remembering something from their past or finally being ready to deal with some of the hurt and pain from their life experience. Often there's a requirement for additional support then. It's a short-term crisis. With support, it's generally possible to move through it. But without support it often means loss of accommodation, going right back to the beginning and starting again and then having to return. Outreach workers would help keep people out of crisis accommodation.

The other potential need is for a variety of semi-supported accommodation options, some of which have been and are being investigated and developed. That is something in between. They wouldn't be out on their own and they wouldn't be in crisis accommodation, which is required only in crisis time. It is a grading of support to allow women to move back to independent living or to know that if they get to a crisis point they have some support to call on without going back to crisis accommodation.

Ms Willow: Can I just add something to that? The model that our service is set on—we do have HT funding and homeless funding—is the provision of community to people. It is a very small community. We have a wellbeing group on Thursday, and it's open to anyone to come back. For some women, that would be the only time in the week they

would eat a meal with someone else. We provide families which have broken down with things you might take for granted. We have crisis accommodation, outreach workers and a workshop program. It's not necessarily for people in crisis, but it is a kind of preventative measure. They come each week. All of the staff go to the lunch. We are not necessarily funded for this, but they have someone to talk to at least once a week to steer them in directions. That service would be more than just crisis accommodation, a roof over the head. They would be able to come by and see somebody and it's okay, but of course that requires someone—

THE CHAIR: It's one thing to give people succour when they're in crisis, and we have to do that so that they can get some strength back and have some assistance to develop strategies on how they are going to tackle the twofold problem they're faced with—the spectre of it occurring again and what they're going to do about it, either just go away from it completely or try to go back into the same situation. How much support do we give these people when they've been empowered, feel really good, go out and then walk straight back into it again? You are saying that some of these people can come back to you.

Ms Willow: Yes. It's the way you view life. You talk about being empowered and going back as if the world is a perfect place, but unfortunately the world's far from perfect. You're very fortunate if you've got friends and family and personal resources, but there are some people, with their family backgrounds and everything, who will always need something. It's not a lacking in them; it's just that that's how they are.

THE CHAIR: Is the reasons that the full-on victim who will try to go back into a family situation—

Ms Willow: Just going back in the world—

THE CHAIR: The wider family, in fact, considers them the perpetrator.

Ms Willow: It's not even going back into the violence; it's going back into the world. The world is a stressful place. It's very stressful for people who don't have the same personal resources as perhaps we who sit around this table do. We've got a home; we've got a job; we've got friends. These people may never have those things.

THE CHAIR: What are we doing about that?

Ms Willow: I think it needs to be more than seeing them as just people who are not well or not right. This is how they are, and that's an okay way to be, but the world isn't set up to deal with them in the same way it's set up to deal with—

THE CHAIR: Is that a gap in the service delivery, or is it just tough luck?

Ms Willow: It's the way our world looks. It's the way our culture, our world and our Australia look, and there are other cultures that offer different things. We've decided that because they fall on that side of the line there's something wrong with them, but in different times, places and cultures we might not view them in the same way.

MRS CROSS: I've asked others this so I'm not picking on you. If I were to ask you to prioritise one of your recommendations as being the most critical to address first, which would it be?

Ms Pearce: They're all critical, but I would probably agree with the point made by WIRE. The loss of public housing is having a detrimental effect on most of the people we work with.

Ms Willow: It's changing the nature of what it is to work in a crisis accommodation service.

THE CHAIR: It is something that has always worried me.

Ms Willow: We're taking people who are living in cars. It wasn't like that before. It has changed. A whole range of other people are living in completely unsuitable and inappropriate situations and are just on our waiting list. We know we should try to take them, but at the end of the day you have to prioritise what you can do. I'd say that most of us have seen that change.

THE CHAIR: If the public housing system was working even to the degree that it was, presumably your bottleneck in the exits would be relieved.

Ms Pearce: It would be completely different.

Ms Willow: We've got greater demands to take refugee families. The sorts of people who are homeless now are different than they used to be. It's not just DV. There are a whole range of—

MRS CROSS: Why would you be involved in refugee families?

Ms Willow: Because we are a crisis refuge for homeless people, for women and children in distress. We don't have a DV. They are in distress; they are homeless.

MRS CROSS: But refugee families are the responsibility of the federal government.

Ms Willow: When they turn up in your refuge—

Ms Pearce: When they're in the ACT and need somewhere to be accommodated, they're not.

Ms Willow: They get into your refuge and they're there with their kids. You don't ask them what their status is on the way in. They're in distress. They're homeless. There's no-one to take them away from you. The other day Jacqui asked whether we could swap a family around. We've got nine of our 16 places filled with refugee people. We don't know what to do with them. It's very difficult.

THE CHAIR: I've had them turn up in my office. Thank you very much for your time, and thanks for the submission.

STEPHEN LARCOMBE and

LYNNE PARSONS

were called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the hearing. For Hansard purposes, I ask you to identify yourselves and the capacity in which you appear before the committee and invite you to make a submission.

Mr Larcombe: I'm Stephen Larcombe. I'm the Chief Executive Officer of Northside Community Service.

Ms Parsons: I'm Lynne Parsons. I'm the Acting Children's, Youth and Family Services Coordinator.

Mr Larcombe: First of all, thank you very kindly for the opportunity to come along and talk to you today. With your blessing, we'd like to leave with the committee a little bit of information which is additional to our talk today.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much. That would be helpful.

Mr Larcombe: Initially, I'll ask Lynne to present a little bit of that additional information verbally. The second half of that adds a little bit more to our submission.

Ms Parsons: I researched six months of statistics on our service provision for youth. We had 923 contacts with young people. Research from the ACT poverty project states that North Canberra has the highest proportion of people living in poverty and the highest percentage of people living in ACT public housing. We also have the highest unemployment rate, at 9.7, compared to 7.3 for the rest of the ACT.

I also looked at the 2001 school census, which gave us a breakdown of students who attend schools in our area. More than half of that population is kindergarten to year 6. We've identified that as an unmet need in our area, because there's no service provision for children of that age.

Mr Larcombe: We'd like to emphasise that emerging population, particularly in the inner north. Redevelopment and things along those lines are certainly driving some of those areas. So there's some long-term stuff for us to think about there.

THE CHAIR: We can all have a look at these stats. I don't think it's really necessary for you to go through them piece by piece, but we will have a look at those, thanks.

Ms Parsons: I suppose one of the most concerning things that I'm seeing at the moment is the increase in young females who are exhibiting quite high-risk sexualised behaviour for money, drugs and alcohol, the amount of alcohol and drug use in young people and the amount of aggression that's appearing with young females at our schools especially and at our drop-in service.

MS DUNDAS: Do you believe that there is enough information and enough free discussion in the school system for young women to feel that they know who to talk to if they need support in terms of sexual activity?

Ms Parsons : It's emerging that way.

MS DUNDAS: Or is it still a stigma?

Ms Parsons: It is stigmatised. We've provided a youth worker in a number of schools, and that's proving to be quite successful. At the one school we attend for three hours per week, the worker is having in excess of 10 young people accessing him. Probably 60 per cent of those people are women.

MRS CROSS: Ten a day or 10 a week?

Ms Parsons : That's 10 a week in a three-hour period. That's all we're funded to do.

MS DUNDAS: How do we fix this? Do you see any strategies we could put in place to open up discussion in schools?

Ms Parsons : There's the current youth services review that's happening. We've had some discussion with the people who are conducting that about concerns we have. We have been talking to the schools. One of the things that we're going to do this year for our area is conduct a schools forum. We are going to get all the schools and some members of the P&C together and talk about all the issues and see what we can do to help. But with our case management service we're only funded for 10 hours per week, and we could easily triple that at the drop of a hat.

Mr Larcombe : In conjunction with some schools, last year we ran some information sessions for parents around drugs and associated uses and participated in a number of advisory groups to schools and things along those lines, supporting a various range of programs that are happening to address a range of issues in that context.

Ms Parsons: One of the strengths we have at Northside Community Service is that we work on an integrated service model. For instance, if I see a young person having conflict with the family, I can call in a family support worker. If that young person is cared for by a grandparent and there are issues, we've got an aged care worker. If the mum needs respite care, we can refer to the child-care worker. If there are issues of domestic violence—

THE CHAIR: It sounds like a great model.

Ms Parsons : Yes, very much so.

Mr Larcombe : It's very much the underpinning strength of what our regional service does in that context. We are participating in the youth services review. If we lose one component of that model, it dramatically reduces the value that we add to our community through an integrated approach.

We mentioned in what we presented a youth specific model. We are proposing further development of the Majura community centre to support the long-term needs of service provision from that integrated service model. We are looking at the physical space that meets the service provision needs and looking at the space being adaptable over time. We've heard a lot in recent times about adaptable housing. We're using the same philosophy in the context of an adaptable community centre. We certainly want to maintain its integrity as a space for the community to access for hire and other activities. But the current area we use for our office and service provision no longer meets the needs of our service for the community and has some limitations. That's the physical component of what we're looking at in capital and in the context of service provision. Our model is also looking into building early intervention case management outreach services as an additional strength in meeting the need we've demonstrated briefly through the two pieces of paper we have provided today.

THE CHAIR: We need to advise you that if you wish to progress the physical part of this you need to make a separate submission to the government on that. It would be part of the capital works program. Our role in that is very restricted. Your role is more powerful than ours. You need to put the case forward to the Treasurer. I would be putting it through Mr Corbell. Thank you for bringing it to our attention, but I think that's probably the more appropriate venue for that submission.

MS DUNDAS: Can I ask a quick technical question? What is CALD?

Ms Parsons: Culture and linguistically diverse background. Sorry, that's quick typing.

THE CHAIR: It has happened before in other submissions.

Mr Larcombe: One hundred per cent of the cases that the guys are dealing with in our youth area are family breakdowns. Our caseworkers and our family community support program are integrated but highly worked as well.

THE CHAIR: Is family breakdown one person peeling off from the rest of it and rejecting it, or is it parents separating and the whole thing disintegrating. Just what is it?

Ms Parsons: It is the whole gamut, if you like. It's quite a complex issue. It can be a young person having an argument with a parent and deciding, "I'm not living there anymore." It can be that they're unhappy at home. Blended families are a big issue, as are divorced parents. With the young male people we see from a single female headed household, there's quite a lot of violence from the young person to the mother, and often they're not strong enough to deal with that.

THE CHAIR: Yes, I've seen that.

Ms Parsons: And it's just huge. Our brief for youths is 12 to 25, but a lot of young people from eight to 12 are trying to access our drop-in centre. Some of these kids I've had dealings with are into crime, using cannabis—all sorts of things.

MRS CROSS: Where are they getting it?

Ms Parsons: It's freely available out there.

THE CHAIR: You know what the answer to that is? Anywhere.

Ms Parsons: Yes. It's scary.

THE CHAIR: It's true.

MS DUNDAS: On the issue of family conflict, you've mentioned the statistic of nearly 100 per cent. I don't mean to diminish it, but are there varying levels of family conflict?

Ms Parsons: Yes, there are.

MS DUNDAS: Are we talking about the "I just don't like my parents today" kind of family conflict through to the very extremes?

Ms Parsons: Yes. The young person decides to leave home, then we have to find them alternative accommodation.

MS DUNDAS: So family conflict has a very broad definition?

Ms Parsons: Very broad, yes.

MS DUNDAS: But it's based on that?

Mr Larcombe: All the cases of our caseworker in the family community support program are very intense and high-need cases. There would be no low-need stuff happening.

Ms Parsons: And that's happening with youth as well. It's not just the one issue we're seeing young people with. It's a multitude of issues, and they're becoming more complex. Our funding levels are quite low so we're bandaiding. We want to do some therapeutic work and work long term a bit more intensely. We don't have the capacity to do that.

MS DUNDAS: You mentioned that eight to 12-year-olds aren't able to access your service, but you're getting them. Where do they go?

Ms Parsons: We can only refer them to the child behavioural unit at Belconnen Community Service.

THE CHAIR: There is a service in the children's and youth family services part of DECS.

Ms Parsons: That's CHADS, is it?

THE CHAIR: No. There's CHADS, but there are also some people within the youth services part of Education and Community Services. They do a little bit of intervention themselves but do mainly referral and bringing people together stuff. But they do see a lot of it. The clergy pick it up, the police pick it up, and a whole stack of people pick it up. Often in the case of 10-year-olds Quamby picks it up.

MRS CROSS: Have your statistics been sourced from the people who come in to see you for help?

Ms Parsons : Yes.

MRS CROSS: Is that where these statistics come from?

Ms Parsons : This is all our data, yes.

MRS CROSS: The demographic you've sourced these statistics from is considered to be troubled young people. The statistic that alarmed me was the mental health statistic of 9 per cent.

Ms Parsons : Yes, it's frightening.

MRS CROSS: If that has been sourced from troubled people who have come to you, that's why it's a higher percentage than if I'd canvassed young people in the community in general.

Ms Parsons : Yes.

Mr Larcombe : In the last paragraph of our submission we talk about the physical aspect of the service, but we would add the recurrent and the service provision aspect. We've addressed that through getting on to the capital works program.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming.

The committee adjourned at 5.37 pm.