

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

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

(Reference: provision of services for homeless men and their children)

Members:

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

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

THURSDAY, 20 JUNE 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 2.02 pm.

GERRY ORKIN and

ANTHONY ROCHESTER were called.

THE CHAIR: Gentlemen, thank you for coming. A procedure has been developed within the Assembly committee system that I will read out. The idea is that this understanding is put to everybody who is making a presentation. Of course, some inquiries are more sensitive than others, and so it has a greater or lesser degree of effect.

You should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections but also certain responsibilities. It means that you are protected from certain legal actions such as being sued for defamation for what you say at this public hearing, but it also means that you have a responsibility to tell the committee the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter.

Gentlemen, as you know, the committee is inquiring into the provision of services for homeless men and their children, and any other related matter. We are hoping to obtain through the course of public hearings and submissions a general feel for how resources are being provided for those people—whether they are sufficient, whether the support services which go with accommodation are actually being provided or not, and what the nature of that is.

So a lot of the information which we are receiving in submissions is education for us. It is not necessary for people to put a specific case forward. It is to make sure that the Assembly understands the whole picture with regard to service for homeless men and their accompanying children so that, in the formulation of possibly future policy around that, we can be an informed bunch of legislators.

The process that we will go through is that I will invite you to make an oral presentation and then we will ask questions, if it is okay with you. I will invite you to do that. I should also at this point inform you that these proceedings are not only being recorded but they are being transmitted through an electronic system within the Assembly and within certain public service offices, so there are people listening in who you can't see. For the purposes of Hansard could you identify yourselves and the organisation that you represent.

Mr Orkin: I am Gerry Orkin. I am on the management group of the Canberra Fathers and Children Service.

Mr Rochester: My name's Anthony Rochester. I am the coordinator of CANFACS, the Canberra Fathers and Children Service.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Rochester. Can I invite you then to make an oral submission?

Mr Orkin: Do we have anything to add?

Mr Rochester: CANFACS would like to put its voice to other voices informing the Assembly that our anecdotal experience, in our short time, and our understanding of the needs in the community at the moment is that homelessness is an increasing issue in the ACT for all groups of homeless populations.

THE CHAIR: I noticed in your submission, which I read with great interest, that you make a point that the reasons for homelessness are many and varied. It seems that instinctively we think of domestic dispute as the cause of that, but that may not be the case. Am I correct in assuming that you are saying that there are so many different reasons that hanging your hat on any one of them is a bad move?

Mr Rochester: For fathers with children I'd say that that is true, but do you want to speak more to—

Mr Orkin: Yes, I guess it comes down to where your energy is put. If you are focusing just on, say, issues around relationship breakdown then I think you might do homeless men and children a bit of a disservice if you have a particular axe to grind. Certainly the problems and difficulties that recently separated fathers experience are important—some of the highest risk in terms of suicide, depression and so on. We don't ignore those issues at all. Those are certainly things that are going on in these men's lives.

But homelessness has so many kind of inputs. There are so many things that can go wrong in a person's life that putting all of your attention, all of your eggs, in that kind of one basket and just attempting to assist them around, say, family law issues or child support issues, misses a whole lot of factors and leaves a whole lot of things unsaid, a whole lot of things uncovered. And I think that is essentially a disservice.

THE CHAIR: How do you actually detect what those issues are? If a man presents with a couple of kids, how do you actually go about finding out which are the issues and addressing those?

Mr Rochester: We ask the father. CANFACS is always client direct in taking the lead from the father to identify what the circumstances and the situations are that have brought him into homelessness and the housing crisis that he is in. Many of those reasons might be the increasing unaffordability of housing; the diminished stock of available housing. There would be social issues. There would also be issues within the family's own history that have been there for a period of time.

Mr Orkin: And in a sense homelessness is one consequence of those things, not the consequence of any one thing.

THE CHAIR: You find that homelessness is the manifestation which brings them to your doorstep. So do you find that they have a principal reason for being homeless, but there are a whole heap of other ones which, in aggregation, we should be attacking, not necessarily the one that people present with?

Mr Rochester: The main story that we hear is inability to secure safe, affordable housing.

THE CHAIR: So would that mean then that if these fathers had a secure tenured roof over their head then most of them are quite capable of solving their own problems?

Mr Orkin: To varying degrees. I think there are some men who show enormous resilience and capacity to organise and get their lives back together, and housing is the one thing that they really need assistance with. But other men would be hard pressed even to support themselves and maintain safe secure accommodation for themselves because of other ongoing factors—drug and alcohol use, mental health issues, and so on.

MS DUNDAS: Following on from that, how do people find your service? Are they referred by other agencies who are maybe dealing with them?

Mr Orkin: Yes, overwhelmingly.

MS DUNDAS: Or do they turn up at your door? How do you get people?

Mr Orkin: Anthony is there day to day, but my sense is that, yes, mostly through referrals from other agencies.

Mr Rochester: Initially we advertised through the free press. We commenced operation of CANFACS on 1 February this year, and we had some people who found out about the service through the free press. But since then all our efforts have been put into forging strong networks, and we have a very thorough and comprehensive list of referring agencies.

MS DUNDAS: Do you get many referrals from the police?

Mr Rochester: We get some from the police, yes.

MS DUNDAS: And do the police drop people off at the house or not?

Mr Rochester: No.

Mr Orkin: I don't think that has happened. There is no problem with that. We would appreciate them calling us before they did. In the same sense as receiving referrals from anywhere else, we have to actually assess whether we can accept them into the service.

MS DUNDAS: I am also interested in how you deal with the children in the facility. What do you define as a "child", what level of care do they need, and how does that impact on whether or not the man can come into the service? A six-month-old baby has a lot of different needs to a 12-year-old, and also has a lot of different needs to a child with a mild disability. How is the child's role fitting in with the service?

Mr Rochester: How are the child's needs taken into account at CANFACS?

MS DUNDAS: Yes, and what do you define as an acceptable family unit to be able to be brought into the house? Is there a line? If you have got an 18-year-old daughter who, for whatever reason, has also left a house with her father and they are both homeless, do they count as a family, or does that 18-year-old daughter classify as an accompanying child? How do you draw the line, and then what happens to the children that are there?

Mr Rochester: There are a couple of tricky questions in all of that. What I would like to say is that the constitution of a family is self-defined from CANFACS' point of view. CANFACS respects that homelessness posits great threats to relationship; homelessness has a potential to destroy relationships. So we wouldn't want to further deteriorate relationships as a result of policies or practices that split up family members.

MS DUNDAS: Yes, sure.

Mr Rochester: But clearly having, say, an 18-year-old girl in the house—and 18-year-olds would be treated as individual adults in their own right—would create a different set of decisions and discussions than if a child was six months, or there was a child with a disability or a family of five or six children.

What we need to manage at CANFACS, given the resources that we have, is how we can meet the accommodation needs, primarily, and then, secondarily, the support needs of families who are homeless. We have to consider (1) availability—do we have the beds and the facilities at our crisis accommodation centre to support the family; and (2) according to mix—how will this family fit within the current mix of people receiving a service so that service is not jeopardised or people's lives are not put at risk?

A lot of that happens through a very thorough initial interview, an intake process. On some occasions we might actually have the availability, but the mix wouldn't be appropriate. So we are talking to the father about his own decisions. If it is a line call, we could leave it up to the father and say, "It might be tough here and it sounds like it's tough where you're at," but we give him the information to make a decision whether he receives outreach from us or accommodation from us. On other decisions we would be very clear on saying that it wouldn't be a successful placement to accommodate the family, given the current mix or if we were full.

MS DUNDAS: The next question then is what happens to people when the accommodation is full or their mix wouldn't be suitable?

Mr Rochester: Some people pass through Canberra—they continue moving. Other people don't. They stay here. We have had a father in his car for over a three-month period. We have fathers living in accommodation that places their kids and themselves at risk of violence and abuse. We have heard reports of some families just moving from friends and family and meeting new people and then staying with them for a period of time and just lunging.

MS DUNDAS: And this is obviously having an impact on the children's education?

Mr Rochester: Absolutely—a major disruption.

MS DUNDAS: Do you promote good educational outcomes for the children in this service?

Mr Orkin: There are some reasonably simple and practical things—like, when we are assisting the father through the housing process, making sure that he makes choices about where he wants to live, based on what makes sense for the children's schooling.

We certainly provide space the children can do homework in. We have in the past made it possible for some young residents to get to basketball matches when there were not any other means available and so on.

Mr Rochester: It is crisis accommodation, with multiple families living under the same roof. But our efforts with our staffing is to endeavour to get normative patterns of living so that the kids can be doing their homework, so that the disruption of homelessness is minimised. But it is still really disconcerting.

Mr Orkin: That hypothetical you raise is interesting—what is the legal definition of a child, for example? Anthony spoke about making sure that we support the good functioning of the family, and if that means occasionally having an 18-year-old daughter in there, who may be supporting her father herself and who may be part of the father support network, I can't see a problem with that if that is going to support the strengthening and maintain the strength of the family.

Mr Rochester: I would also just like to emphasise that CANFACS sees that it is the relationship—that is, the client in a sense—that we are working with to get a balance between the sometimes competing, sometimes contradictory, needs of fathers and their children. We are working with the relationship. So for us our service was specifically positioned in the tender and also in our policies, procedures and practices on a day-to-day basis to be about enhancing relationships—not working to have clear categories of tick the box sort of acceptance but looking at the complexity of families' needs in complex circumstances. So I think we have got a good theoretical and professional basis for getting into some of that complexity.

MS DUNDAS: Can you explain how the outreach service works? You mentioned that there might be people who don't come into the crisis accommodation but you offer them outreach. How does that work? Is it based at the centre or is it something that Marymead looks after?

Mr Orkin: A number of different ways. I have worked at the centre for a very short time, but I had experience of going out to a father's house and helping him fill out forms—housing forms and Centrelink forms and so on. He had no transport; he lived in pretty much the most northerly suburb of Canberra. There is no way we could have done it over the phone. He needed to feel reassured and comfortable with the process. So I went out, took a laptop out, and we worked on this documentation together.

MS DUNDAS: Is there much demand for that kind of individual outreach—people who you could say were almost on the edge that don't need crisis accommodation but they need that outreach service? Are you able to meet demand for that outreach?

Mr Orkin: Not yet, no.

Mr Rochester: We have actually 15 families as of today—15 families on our wait list; that is fathers with children who need accommodation; those fathers that are in crisis—and we have to make a decision about our resources versus need. We attend to the priority cases in terms of doing some outreach.

Because we run the crisis accommodation centre and families have to share with people who are strangers, the disruption and the risks to children are increased from being in a refuge sometimes. So if we can support a family in the caravan or the camping park, wherever they are, or in their current accommodation as long as it is safe then our preference would be to provide outreach to ensure that that accommodation doesn't break down to the point where they need to be accommodated in a crisis accommodation centre.

We also provide outreach after the period of stay, so that the families have been supported and some of the good gains that they have made at CANFACS are continued on beyond their residential stay. As I say, our outreach service is trying to address very complex needs in many situations with very small resources to try and make a difference. Often it is case management, mind mapping, planning with the fathers about what are the greatest challenges that are in front of them and how to address those. But it should also be said that our outreach program isn't fully functional at the moment. We have had an extended court proceeding that has diminished those resources, energy and time to attend to those needs.

THE CHAIR: Given that you are one of the major players in addressing this need, do you think that there is a lack of resourcing out there to address the preventative part of your outreach? As I understand it, you would prefer to go and see people in a caravan park and try and help them sort their lives out so that they can go from there to another more safe secure piece of accommodation.

Mr Orkin: Yes, correct.

THE CHAIR: Do you think that perhaps in the distribution of resources in this direction there could be a little bit more attention paid to that?

Mr Orkin: I think there could be. I think there would be issues of access—how do those fathers find out about you and how do you find out about them. Preventative work is clearly more efficient, clearly more cost effective in all kinds of different ways but it is also the hardest to do.

Mr Rochester: And clearly given the unmet need for accommodation, the unmet need in the community, I am sure that many crisis accommodation services would join me and say that the diversion of funds from accommodation to outreach would not be a positive step. Crisis accommodation centres are required and we are definitely not advocating that an outreach service would be able to prevent homelessness.

Mr Orkin: Yes, I don't think it really replaces crisis accommodation at all. I think it enhances it but I don't think it replaces it.

THE CHAIR: Do you think that perhaps it would be useful if the government of the day were to be encouraged to consider the resourcing of this as a policy in addressing the issues that you guys face every day?

Mr Orkin: Yes, and they are not issues only common to us. I think we said this once, and we will say it again, that our particular target group is the subject of this inquiry, but you could hold an inquiry about indigenous or youth housing and you would hear the

same stories. This is a really controversial area. Everybody and their dog want to say something about it. You can understand the kind of pressure and we would love to be able to service more families. We can understand the pressure on government to provide more funding for this group, but we wouldn't want to get into a kind of competitive fight for the small pie. We would love to see the pie much bigger for all of us to be better resourced.

MS DUNDAS: I have got one more question.

THE CHAIR: Well, go for it.

MS DUNDAS: Not just in your service but across the board with the homeless people that you are dealing with, are you working to address or finding that you need to work on a culturally and sexually diverse kind of program? Is there a broad cultural mix both in indigenous/multicultural but also gay fathers leaving a relationship? Are you branching out?

Mr Rochester: That is the nature of our community, isn't it? It is a very diverse community.

MS DUNDAS: Yes. Is that being shown through in the people that are coming to the house?

Mr Orkin: We have been operating for three or four months and I can't say we have encountered every kind of father, because we haven't. But the policies and our openness to responding appropriately to each of those communities is certainly in place.

MS DUNDAS: Are you finding different barriers there, though? I am sure this would be an impact on what you determine as the mix, the best mix, for the house. If there are fathers already in the house who may not have the same attitudes towards different parts of the community because they are just not informed, are you finding it an issue?

Mr Orkin: We have had indigenous fathers in the house. Is your question about: do we have to manage, say, other fathers' racism towards indigenous fathers in the house? Is that kind of what you are talking about?

Mr Rochester: Yes, or any oppressed people.

MS DUNDAS: Well, yes, that is part of it.

Mr Orkin: Yes. There are clear policies and pretty much a zero tolerance system in place. If racism, sexism, homophobia—those kinds of things—are acted out on other residents, that is not acceptable.

MS DUNDAS: I guess it also applies to children as well.

Mr Orkin: Sure. We name that in our residential agreement. We ask the fathers to sign that as part of entering into what we are trying to create at CANFACS, which is a safe place for all people. And then the working would be to facilitate that, particularly between the children and between the families on a day-to-day basis.

MS DUNDAS: But are you finding, in your work, that there are extra barriers there? It is bad enough that, for whatever reason, you are homeless and you are looking after your kids at the same time, but are you finding that issues are compounded because of cultural and sexual barriers and discrimination that still exist? Is there a subset out there that is—

Mr Orkin: I am thinking of some of the indigenous clients we have worked with, and there are clearly additional factors in terms of our sensitivity and the need to understand what was going on for them and their families in a different way from what might have been going on for other families. They would come into the service with an extra weight on their shoulders. I think that is quite clear and we do take account of that and hopefully our service responds appropriately and respectfully to that.

Mr Rochester: But given an indigenous family as an example, then the availability of services to support that family in culturally appropriate ways is less than for non-indigenous Australians. Also the levels of trust sometimes are going to be an issue for an indigenous family with service provision, particularly when you are talking about accommodation being unstable.

Mr Orkin: Particularly when you are talking about histories of children being taken away from their parents, there are a whole bunch of things that need to be considered around that.

Mr Rochester: Yes.

THE CHAIR: I would just like to ask on a different tack: what is your relationship with Community Housing and ACT Housing like?

Mr Orkin: We talk to them fairly regularly.

Mr Rochester: Daily.

Mr Orkin: It is a frustrating relationship at times because they have constraints, they have availability and so on. I think there is a kind of mutual understanding that we are all, to a large extent, pushing our heads against a very high mountain.

Mr Rochester: We get referrals through the specialist housing managers. I think that the housing policy section has a thorough understanding of what CANFACS is doing. Housing is being really supportive in terms of painting and carpeting and retiling the house, doing renovations to ensure that the structural facility is better suited to what we are trying to do. I think we have had numerous contacts with most of the departments in Housing just as part of our day-to-day work and the modifications that we are doing.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any connection—“contact” would be a better word—with the private real estate market?

Mr Orkin: “Connection” would be good; “contact”, lots of. Our workers have gone and looked around houses with fathers. You can count that as outreach. We take a father out to a house and say, “Have you thought about this? Is this going to work for your family in that regard?” and so on. So we are involved. But you mention “contact”.

Mr Rochester: The private rental market is a hard place for fathers who are homeless and particularly because you don't get a good reference from a crisis accommodation service. So we are downplaying that part of it. We would be encouraging the father to get support letters from employers; or people who can be character witnesses; or state permanent employment or long-term employment. Some of these fathers also have had poor housing records and don't present competitively and well, given a whole lot of other issues that are going on for them, so they don't compete strongly on the private market. Nevertheless—

Mr Orkin: Or on the public market. Quite a few of our fathers have previous histories with ACT Housing where they may have run up fairly substantial debts. We then need to work with them on employment and income and those kinds of budgeting and so on to help them get that down so they can begin to address that.

Mr Rochester: Nevertheless, I think three of the fathers who have left CANFACS have secured private market housing. So it is possible. It is probably also useful to say that some of those fathers relocated to the Queanbeyan area because rentals were much more affordable. But that caused community dislocation from the children's schools and a whole lot of other issues, but the fathers simply could not afford to rent on the private market within the ACT.

THE CHAIR: And what about the relationship with the department of education in respect of education and support service for the kids? Do you have a relationship with the youth services and those sorts of people?

Mr Rochester: This is our fourth month of operation. What we would like to be doing is making stronger links with schools as communities, school counsellors, and linking with the education facilities more.

MS DUNDAS: I have one last question.

THE CHAIR: And then might have to wrap it up.

MS DUNDAS: Do you find a need to run family counselling if there is tension between children and their father? Is there a lot of need for that?

Mr Orkin: My observation is there is a lot of need for counselling about all kinds of different things. Be aware that sometimes counselling with men just looks like a conversation over a cup of tea. It is not a sort of formal session and it happens on a constant basis. But you are talking particularly around parenting issues?

MS DUNDAS: Yes, particularly around parenting and children getting upset that they are now homeless and "it's all dad's fault" and "now you're asking me to live in a shelter". Do those issues come up or am I making a stereotype?

Mr Rochester: No. The father brings in bags of luggage and kids bring in bags of worries. So the kids are thinking about this, and a lot of it is unspoken. Marymead has been good to us. Each child who comes to the centre, as we said in our submission, gets

a soft plush toy and we sometimes work with the child and the soft plush toy to unpack some of these worries so that we know what they are.

One of our greatest regrets is that—and I think probably this is true for crisis accommodation services who support parents with children—CANFACS is not funded for over the weekend. So for fathers who only have contact with their children over the weekend—that is, our category 2 group—we have very little contact with those children. On the weekends when all the families and all the children are actually together, there is no staff actually available at that time.

In the evenings we are staffed until 10 pm. But often homework, school sports if the child's involved in that, or early nights and just the bedtime routine of getting two, three, four children bathed and fed and off to bed mean the staff have limited contact to do that family counselling. In some situations because of the way that we are resourced, that means that there are great needs for family counselling but limited opportunities.

THE CHAIR: Would you say that that is because the government—any government—is not providing sufficient money to enable those services to be provided, or is it that the competitive nature of the contract means that any services like you people are going to suffer the same thing?

Mr Orkin: The competitive element that was missing from this recent tender process was on price. The price was up front, we knew what the price was, and it was about prioritising the needs and what we could do to respond to those needs within that budget. So I am not sure there is—

THE CHAIR: So in fact the actual quality of the service was significantly affected by the starting figure?

Mr Orkin: It always is.

THE CHAIR: Would you say then that really the way the competitive process ought to be run is it should be largely open-ended and then a value judgement made on the people given the contract about whether the service is right?

Mr Orkin: I don't think that is quite practical. I think governments can be better informed and then specify the nature of the service. But my observation is that tenders tend to be less and less detailed in terms of what needs to be delivered. It is more about "Here's a bunch of money. Tell us what you can do for it," and I don't think that necessarily serves the best interest of the services, or especially the clients.

THE CHAIR: Do you think you will benefit from the changes to the purchaser/provider model?

Mr Orkin: In what regard?

THE CHAIR: My understanding is that the nature of the purchaser/provider model is going to change, and that it is going to be more outcome driven—the relationship between provider and the purchaser, if you like, is going to be outcome driven rather than process driven.

Mr Orkin: I think, if managed well, that kind of system benefits everybody. And it can be managed poorly. It can come down to a bodies through the door kind of measure, which I don't think is at all appropriate. I think it is bodies through the door and quality of service to those people, and the outcomes that they report that they are achieving. Those are the important measures.

Mr Rochester: And an outcome analysis of homelessness would be a complex analysis. It wouldn't simply be—

Mr Orkin: Yes.

Mr Rochester: Could I just add one thing with the funding issue. I think that it is important to have standards, and I think it is important to have a dollar value that can ensure that those standards are delivered.

THE CHAIR: Yes. I understand that the government is also about to review, or is in the process of reviewing, the issue of homelessness generally. A task force. Presumably you guys are having some input into that?

Mr Orkin: Sure, a means analysis is in progress.

MS DUNDAS: Affordable accommodation.

THE CHAIR: Yes, the affordable accommodation task force. Although you have been in this particular service only for four months, presumably you have gained heaps of experience in that four months. You are sharing those experiences, I would hope.

MS DUNDAS: I have one very quick question.

THE CHAIR: A last question.

MS DUNDAS: Do you think there is a need for crisis accommodation for families, being the full family unit of two parents and any number of kids? Do you see that there is a need for that? Are you getting men ringing up saying, "I've got my partner and my children, and we need accommodation"?

Mr Rochester: And whether that partner is male or female or—

MS DUNDAS: Yes, either way.

Mr Rochester: Yes, we do get calls.

MS DUNDAS: Two adults and any number of kids. Do you think there is a need for that kind of crisis accommodation?

Mr Orkin: I think there is, and a need for more housing stock for those kinds of people more generally—non-crisis accommodation housing stock.

Mr Rochester: Some of those families might not necessarily need supported accommodation. Some definitely would. But, yes, different models of—

MS DUNDAS: Do you get many requests in the form of “Can I bring my partner along? We’re all homeless”?

Mr Rochester: We do. I could go back over how many, but mostly we refer the families to St Judes in Canberra. That is set up for that if they have a vacancy.

MS DUNDAS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: All right gentlemen. Thank you very much for taking the time to come before us, and good luck with the service.

DENNISE SIMPSON was called.

THE CHAIR: It is nice to see you again, Dennise. Were you here when I read from the card?

Ms Simpson: I was indeed.

THE CHAIR: Okay, I will not go through that process. You have been here often enough to know the ropes.

Ms Simpson: Yes, and I heard that there were other people listening in the Assembly, and all sorts of things.

THE CHAIR: I will get you to make an opening remark. For the purpose of Hansard, please identify yourself and the organisation you represent, and then we will get into it.

Ms Simpson: My name is Dennise Simpson. I am manager of the Domestic Violence Crisis Service.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission and for sparing us your time today. Would you like to make an opening statement and then we can take it from there?

Ms Simpson: I would like to go directly to the question you just asked CANFACS in relation to accommodation for families. It is certainly something that I addressed in my submission. We see it as a real need. Even though CANFACS said that they generally refer to St Jude's, St Jude's is not offering crisis accommodation. Nowhere is actually offering crisis accommodation. We think that that is of real concern.

I have named a few variations of what I am naming as family here, which might be mother, father, children, or might be mother or father with adult children. In this particular instance, in my submission I talked about a mother with adult sons, that they had all been abused by the father, that they were wanting to stay together, that we were aware that lots of services would have thought that it was a reasonable thing to separate them, that they very much saw their role as supporting their mother, and we certainly saw that as their role as well. They had all been traumatised that night and for us there was no option but to put them in a motel.

THE CHAIR: I would like to ask you a question about something that has come up in some of the submissions and in the evidence of some of the people who have come before us already. It is about separating people who have been suffering elder abuse. As I understand it, and I am happy to be corrected, elder abuse fits squarely into domestic violence and when people have had enough, one partner has copped it particularly, and they leave as a couple, there does not seem to be anything in Canberra to provide succour for those people; it is always said, "Let's split them up because we don't have anywhere else to send them." Is that your experience?

Ms Simpson: I am unclear as to whom you are naming there as the two that leave together.

THE CHAIR: There may be, for example, a husband and wife living with children and one of the children, the person with whom they are living, is actually perpetrating elder abuse and the only way they can escape from that is to go, but they go as a couple. I am trying to get a handle on whether that is an issue for us to look at, whether there is a lot of that happening, and, regardless of how many there are, what happens to those people when they do escape.

Ms Simpson: There are parts of that that I can speak to and there are parts that I cannot. It is not something that DVCS has been working with. We have certainly been working with elder abuse and, within that, the most part that we have been working with is domestic violence. But you are probably aware that we have done quite a lot of work around the broader issue of elder abuse, bringing in financial power of attorney stuff, a whole range of issues.

We are generally working with situations where it is an older man who is abusive or violent to his partner. We also find that in some of those situations the abuse was not something that was always present in the relationship, that sometimes it is abuse and violence that have come on because the man has Alzheimer's. We have been working with that sort of situation. So, within that sort of situation, we find that the woman finds it really difficult to consider what to do with her life, because it is actually the person who has been her loving partner for many years who is now being violent or abusive to her.

The idea of couples being split generally, and I am not talking from a service experience here as much as something that I am aware of, is a real problem—older people needing to be split just because there is a situation where neither one of them has the capacity any more to look after the other or to look after themselves.

THE CHAIR: It may be that there is an issue surrounding their need to escape and, once they have a secure roof over their heads, they would be quite okay with support, but I wonder how much that is prevalent out there.

Ms Simpson: The support generally for older people is something that I have raised in my submission. I focused on a rather limited aspect of that. I talked about the need for the government to look at accommodation for older men who had actually used violence in their relationship because we worked with women who felt that their choices were very limited in terms of what they could do with their lives to make them any different because they felt responsible for the wellbeing of their partner. If they were living in an abusive relationship, they felt that until there was somewhere for their partner to go they could not actually look at their own options. Because this inquiry is into homeless men and their children, I did not include the full extent of what I would have said about elder abuse.

THE CHAIR: I understand that. It is just that the committee had no idea about it at all until it was raised in the evidence given to it. We are beginning to think that perhaps it is a policy area on which the government ought to start doing some work to ascertain the extent of it and the extent of the support which exists to fix it. You have raised one just now.

Ms Simpson: John, are you aware of a report out there called, I think, report No 11?

MS DUNDAS: The Assembly called on the government to respond to that report.

Ms Simpson: Yes. I saw that in the paper, I think. I saw it somewhere.

THE CHAIR: One of our members did that.

Ms Simpson: I am also aware that the government is looking at some accommodation options, I think specifically for older women who are escaping domestic violence or elder abuse generally.

THE CHAIR: Yes.

Ms Simpson: I am also unaware of what those options are that they are looking at. I think we talked about this in the status of women inquiry.

THE CHAIR: Just to extend it, you mentioned that the people who come to see you as victims of a domestic violence situation are women in 95 per cent of the cases and they are worried about the welfare of the abusive partner. I am just wondering about whether, if there was supported accommodation for the men with regimes centred around the use of violence in the relationship, there would be a chance of rescuing that relationship. But we do not have accommodation centred around counselling and treatment for that man to address the need to do that.

Ms Simpson: John, I am not going to have a very hopeful response here but, if we are looking at a situation where, firstly, a man has been using violence for 20, 30, 40, 50 or 60 years against his partner, and more so in the period of 40, 50 or 60 years because we are talking about older men, then I think that it is highly unlikely that at that point of time you are going to be able to do anything that is effective in relation to changing their behaviour. The other scenario that I gave was of the older man who has some sort of illness and who was not abusive prior to the behaviour change with the onset of Alzheimer's or whatever. Again, I think it is a situation where you are not going to be able to do anything in that regard.

MS DUNDAS: You refer in your submission to the need to look at children, particularly young boys, who are seeing the cycle of violence within their parents and taking it upon themselves that the only way to get through to mum is by hitting her or that violence is an acceptable form of communication. Can you expand on that need that you are seeing?

Ms Simpson: This is a growing area of concern, not only for our service but services generally. DVCS is convening forums within the youth sector. We have convened two, and we have a third one coming up, where service providers within the youth sector come together and talk about issues with young people, particularly young men who are using violence. That is violence in a whole range of areas, of course, including school and the community. But what DVCS has been finding is on the increase, and I have given you statistics in my submission, is that young men are using violence particularly against their mothers or stepmothers.

This is what is being seen by a whole range of services and there is very little in place for interventions in relation to it. DVCS does work in this area. It is not something that we have been funded to do. It is something that has come more to our notice over the past couple of years. We think that it needs a very particular intervention because lots of these young boys have also been subjected to violence or abuse by their families, in particular their fathers. In some cases they are still being subjected to violence or abuse. In some cases the father has already left the family. That is one area that we think government really needs to take on board.

THE CHAIR: You are trying to attack the cultural aspect whereby it is passed on from generation to generation.

Ms Simpson: We are finding that generally in relation to young boys who are using violence that it has been something that they have grown up with, that they have witnessed or been subjected to. We are not saying that that is always the case. We have also worked with young men whom we do not believe there was violence in their families. Our workers have described how they have walked into a house that was quite grand on the outside, a large mansion in Harcourt Hill or something like that, and inside it was close to a war zone with doors off, holes in walls and broken furniture. This was all from a 16-year-old whom the whole family was in fear of. We attended one last week where a 10-year-old had the mother and older son bailed up with a knife. We had been working with four young boys in that family. All of them are using violence. Knives are a common weapon of choice. The father has been abusive and still is abusive to all of those boys, even though he is not currently living with the family. Just to follow on from that, we do not think that a punitive approach is what is needed in relation to those boys.

THE CHAIR: It is just adding to it. In regard to our terms of reference, I think I have detected that there are some people who are homeless because of their circumstances and have been left with the children, but those people were actually the perpetrators of the violence. Am I correct in thinking that there is a relationship between your organisation and other men's support accommodation centred around supporting or addressing those people?

Ms Simpson: We certainly have a working relationship with CANFACS. We also do with Samaritan House, but, of course, they do not have children. But some of the men going through Samaritan House would still be having some sort of access to their children, even though it is not living access. Is that what you were referring to?

THE CHAIR: Yes. What sort of success rate do you think you have with working with those men? Do you find that those men, having found themselves homeless with their kids and knowing that they were the perpetrator of the domestic violence and that it had a lot to do with their state, are prepared to address their aberrant behaviour?

Ms Simpson: I just think that it is an individual thing. Some men will never face up to their responsibility in relation to the violence or the situation that they find themselves in and some men are really open to it. We work with men who are really open to looking at the impact that their behaviour has had on their families, their partner, and are actually seeking something different, wanting something different, in their lives. I do not think that it is an area that you can generalise in and say that men are never or men are always.

Some individual men really make a change in their lives that totally benefits their children and their current or future partners, but some men never.

MS DUNDAS: Also in your submission—sorry to change the topic—you refer to the need for greater focus on accommodation needs for women with boys over the age of 12. We discussed earlier the need of men with daughters over the age of 12. What do you see as the particular issues with women and their elder sons and how they find accommodation? You touched on it earlier.

Ms Simpson: What do I see as the issues?

MS DUNDAS: Why is it something that you have brought to our attention?

Ms Simpson: Because there is so little choice as to where they can go. Most of the refuges have a cut-off age of about 12. I have actually named in my submission a couple of places that will take boy children who are older because they have separate houses. One refuge that is currently housing women and their older sons informed me last week that this will probably have to stop very soon because they do not have the capacity to keep on using it in that sort of way.

MS DUNDAS: Why not? Are the problems that a 15-year-old boy is going to have a disturbing effect on the other women in the refuge?

Ms Simpson: Because they think that, for example, a 15-year-old boy is too old to be in the refuge with the other women and children, then that family would be placed in this separate dwelling, this separate house. What they are finding is that it almost becomes a crisis refuge instead of a halfway house and they do not have the staff to support it as a crisis refuge. That is why they are saying to me that they are going to have to stop what they are currently doing. This family, if it wasn't for the idea of having a 15-year-old boy, would still require a whole range of support that they can only get from being in the actual crisis accommodation.

THE CHAIR: You have raised an issue for us to consider when we deliberate, that is, that our charter is to look into services for homeless men and their accompanying children and we struggled for a while on defining what is a child. We have not struggled on the definition for what is a homeless man. There may be reason for us to consider the plight of a 16-year-old boy who is actually with his mother and the crisis is a family unit crisis. She has been the victim of domestic violence and has bolted, taking him with her, so that he is actually a homeless young man.

Ms Simpson: Exactly.

THE CHAIR: Instead of having accompanying children, he has an accompanying mother. Is that an area that we are missing a bit, Denise?

Ms Simpson: Yes. It is a matter of words, isn't it?

THE CHAIR: Unfortunately, when you have a matter of words, often the dollars determine the matter of words.

Ms Simpson: It is the mother with her son or it is the son with his mother. When I talked before about those young men, they were actually in their early 20s, so they certainly weren't children, but they were accompanying their mothers. In this situation it might be mothers still being more the carer of the 16-year-old, but it could be the 16-year-old being more the carer of the mother.

THE CHAIR: It could be the 16-year-old caring for the mother, but the 16-year-old not having the wherewithal to provide a secure environment.

Ms Simpson: Exactly.

THE CHAIR: So, because of the nature of the domestic violence, they are actually the stronger of the two partners, but do not have the skills, the wherewithal, the networks, the contacts and the money to fix their problems.

Ms Simpson: Absolutely. I actually think that the terms of reference are quite narrow. Something that I raised in my submission is that I think that you must look at the competing needs and priorities prior to making a decision. It was somewhere around the mid to late 1980s, I think, when the last women's and children's refuge was funded and that would have been Doris. We are now getting up to around the 20th year, which is a significant period of time given the growth rate of Canberra generally and the growth rate of all services.

THE CHAIR: We have a provision enabling us to look at an any other matter, which is a catch-all phrase at the bottom that enables us to have the freedom to say to the Assembly that this issue has been raised in the context of the total environment of homelessness of men and the services which support or try to address the reasons why people become homeless, and it spreads after that. The feeling I am getting is that there is a myriad of reasons for people becoming like that.

Ms Simpson: John, you asked a question of CANFACS about what was homelessness and I was thinking at the time that one of the things that we find in relation to a woman and homelessness is that generally you do not have to look very far into her background to find violence of some kind, be it sexual abuse or domestic violence. That may be a similar thing to what you would find in quite significant numbers of young men, but I don't necessarily think that that is what you would find in relation to men generally. That is a factor that exists for most women.

It is because of competing priorities all the time. Most of the refuges around town are for women and their children escaping domestic violence. Because of the numbers that are waiting and turned away because of the lack of space, then it looks at domestic violence in almost the fairly narrow sense of the crisis, of how immediate it was. But it is so questionable to think about the fact that someone actually is homeless because the domestic violence might have happened six months ago, but prior to that they might have had a really stable life for themselves and their children and things could have been totally all over the place since then. So what do you call the period of domestic violence and when should they be able to have supported accommodation because of it? What can I say? I think it is just such a shame that we have to make those sorts of differences.

THE CHAIR: Do you think that the outcome and impact of that, given that there has not been any real growth for 20 years despite the increase in the number of incidents, has actually made us start to concentrate on getting a faster throughput, that there is pressure on the refuges to do something bandaid quick because there are so many people waiting for these services?

Ms Simpson: You can only bandaid so quickly anyway because the thing is that most refuges have their clients there until such time as they receive other housing. A couple of refuges don't, but the wait for housing is lengthy and there are the problems with the private rental market that were named by CANFACS. I would say everything that they named as problems for men in the private rental market is bigger for women and their children in the private rental market. You can't actually shuffle them through very fast because of the housing issue.

MS DUNDAS: Can I change the topic again? We briefly discussed the need of young men with their mothers in crisis accommodation. What do you see as particular to the needs of young women with their fathers in crisis accommodation?

Ms Simpson: I think the same. However, I would wonder how much of it there is. What we see quite a bit of is women with their older sons, and we know that that is the one that is not there in the refuges, problems with finding accommodation in refuges. We are often placing women and their older sons in motels because we cannot find any alternatives. Fathers and their older daughters—

MS DUNDAS: Not just older daughters, but younger daughters as well. You said that there is a limit of 12 years put on women and their sons. Do you think that there needs to be a similar arrangement with men and their daughters?

Ms Simpson: I would want to be assured that there were safety mechanisms in place to ensure the safety of those young women in a refuge if it was a men's refuge. I am not sure what those safety mechanisms would look like.

THE CHAIR: That is a good point. I have asked the questions I need to.

MS DUNDAS: So have I.

THE CHAIR: Thanks, Dennise, for giving up your time and giving us a submission. You have opened quite a number of doors.

Ms Simpson: Thank you.

RICHARD SHANAHAN was called.

THE CHAIR: Mr Shanahan, thank you very much for your time. I am obliged to read the wording on the card that you have before you. There have been movements in respect of some rather delicate inquiries that have been taking place recently, so I will just read this out before we proceed.

You should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections, but also certain responsibilities. It means that you are protected from legal action, such as being sued for defamation for what you say at this public hearing. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell the committee the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter.

I am sure that will not be necessary, but nonetheless I am obliged to do that. I thank you for your time and your submission.

Mr Shanahan: It's a pleasure to be here.

THE CHAIR: Could I now invite you to make an opening statement so that we can then address some questions? Before you do, could you identify yourself by giving your name and the organisation you represent for the purpose of Hansard.

Mr Shanahan: Sure.

THE CHAIR: I should also tell you that these proceedings are being broadcast through the electronic system throughout the Assembly, and to certain public service offices that are on the network. Thank you.

Mr Shanahan: My name is Richard Shanahan, and I am representing basically two services—the Woden Community Services which the programs I coordinate are currently run under, the programs being the Young Men's Support Network and the Triple M Mentoring Program. We are in the process of incorporating and actually separating from Woden Community Services. We have incorporated it into an organisation called Men's Link, which will endeavour to continue to run those two programs and potentially broaden our horizons into other areas.

You may have received a letter of submission, which was fairly brief, and I might just repeat a couple of paragraphs from it and that will give you a bit of a better background.

THE CHAIR: Fine, thank you.

Mr Shanahan: The Young Men's Support Network is comprised of in excess of 26 volunteers, all of whom either mentor young men or contribute in some way to the area of health and wellbeing for boys and men. I should clarify that that bracket is in the ages of 12 to 25. We also do general support work for young men and boys, some of which is in the form of counselling or in a welfare-type capacity.

Specific work in finding accommodation is occasionally done for people experiencing family breakdown. This is usually for single young men and rarely for fathers with children. I think it was important to clarify exactly what our background experience is there. Despite this, we believe that there are some common issues that derive around family breakdown, and are important for you to consider. Certainly, we deal with many situations that involve conflict between family members. Part of our challenge is to work with young men and their family in order to resolve conflict or negotiate solutions. We are particularly interested in preventative solutions that enable people to move on before situations become too critical.

In referring to the issue of accommodation, I think there are a few issues that we drew attention to in this particular letter, and the main one was to emphasise that our experience is basically in the area early intervention and in working with young men at a level before they leave home. Part of our work is definitely orientated towards preventing them from losing accommodation or losing out in a family situation. So we definitely work to strengthen families, and we work to support families who are experiencing a risk of breakdown which may lead to homelessness for young men.

We do occasionally get requests for services to find accommodation for young men, and that has been very rare. It is usually in the age groups of around about 15 to 21, 16 to 21. A couple of our young men who are in the mentoring program have been fairly heavily tied up in youth refuges systems and so on, so we have some experience in dealing with the refuge system.

Usually our background is from a referring capacity. So we have some experience in dealing with the accommodation services, and we certainly have a potential interest. We could provide you some important information that might be helpful around how we work with those services.

I might briefly point out that probably the main idea that I would suggest in terms of operational issues around the accommodation system and so on would be—and I am not aware of it being here in the ACT at the moment—when we actually refer a young man to the service, we spend a great deal of time often in trying to find a service for him that would be able to take him, that will meet the criteria. It may be that if he is above 18 then obviously we target a different service. If he is under 18 it would be targeting a younger service that has the funding to meet that particular age bracket. In doing that, often we might need to ring four or five different places. To find out whether they have accommodation, you need to do a ring around. It does take a lot of time and effort.

You might have a young man who is a little bit in crisis and so on. So it is a difficult situation when you are ringing up and having to re-describe the situation to hostels and so on, having to go through the same story again and again, and trying to find out whether they do have a place available for him.

An obvious solution around that would be for services to have strong links, and a particular link around a data system that would be accessible for us to actually be able to look up on the net or on a digital system and say, “Well, where’s the availability?” We would assume that services would be keep that up-to-date on an hour-to-hour basis or a day-to-day basis, or whatever it would be. That would be reasonably reliable. So, therefore, we would just get into a system and check out five different refuges. If only

one has a vacancy, we can ring them without having to do four or five ring arounds. Basically this is going to save us time, save us money, and I presume save other services money too. It will save a lot of angst for the young man who is sitting there having his story retold and retold, which can be a bit uncomfortable for him. It also is a potential instrument that could empower the young man—it could allow him to link into the system himself and take some control over that process. Obviously it can be a very powerless type of situation for them when they are coming to someone and really relying on us to find them a home.

THE CHAIR: Who would you suggest would be the most appropriate organisation to run that sort of thing?

Mr Shanahan: I think CANFACS is an obvious service that would be potentially set up to do that. If we were going to broaden the service and make an adult men's thing, and potentially for young men too, you could do it specifically along gender lines. But it doesn't necessarily have to be on gender lines. You could actually do that sort of service across the whole of the youth sector, housing sector, across women's services and so on, and that particular service could serve every worker in the area, and I could guarantee it would save the government a lot of money in terms of hours and so on.

I am not aware that that is there at the moment. It has passed my mind on a few occasions that it has potential to—

THE CHAIR: I don't think it is. My experience when I had a homeless man sitting in my office in front of me, having spent the night in a park, was that we then spent the rest of the afternoon with three phones going trying to find this gentleman a roof over his head for the night.

Mr Shanahan: It's a nightmare. I have done it many a time. It drives you crazy as a worker because it is also hard work. You really have to push buttons and try and get people. I have been in a situation where we have had to just basically beg some money so that we could get them a hotel or whatever. Particularly working with young men and issues around suicide prevention, it leaves me with some concern as a worker to leave a young man alone in a hotel for the night because hotels aren't very friendly places, they are pretty sterile. But generally when we do that sort of thing, it is really important to link him in the next day to get him to visit somewhere and so on.

MS DUNDAS: With the young men that you are dealing with, and I notice that one of things that you are running with the Triple M course is anger management—

Mr Shanahan: Yes.

MS DUNDAS: Are you saying that young men—

Mr Shanahan: I should clarify that we actually aren't funded to run anger management. It is a bit like Denise's situation—we get such an overwhelming request for support in that area.

MS DUNDAS: So are you saying the young men that you are dealing with are picking up bad habits—that on seeing what is going on in the world they are becoming more violent?

Mr Shanahan: Look, I think it is far more complicated than that. I think you are looking at multiple factors for issues around anger. It is sort of like the conversation you could have about it for two or three around a dinner, and I could still come up with solutions and for reasons why that is the case.

I will give you a few main reasons that I think are important. I really do feel that in our culture, as a whole—and this isn't to point fingers at government or our level or whatever—we actually don't value young men in general. That is not just because it is a conscious thing—we have kind of lost our track in terms of ways that we can value them.

In respect of the guys that we see and come across—and this is generalising once again—there are a lot of young men in fairly challenging situations who are doing really well out there. I think there has been a huge change in circumstances in our culture in the last 40/50 years. Because of our incorporation process, I have had the pleasure of visiting a lot of organisations in the last six months—from very conservative organisations like Rotary-based organisations to other organisations like the Country Women's Association—in an effort to get more funding for our programs. It is amazing the response we are getting from these inquiries.

Basically there is a huge concern out there around how we value young men. Obviously there are a couple of really clear indicators that we don't value them. One of those is the high suicide rate amongst young men. That would be for me a very clear factual indicator. The second one would be the lack of success in boys' education and their lack of success at school. So for me there is something there that is happening that is giving them a sense that they are not being valued as people. Once again, I am generalising here because there are a lot of them that do feel valued, too. But the ones that come to our service obviously aren't experiencing that.

MS DUNDAS: In your submission you touched on the different barriers, or different problems, that men have in getting support, be that homeless men looking for accommodation or the young men looking for something to do that you were talking about. Do you want to expand on that more, as well as on society not valuing young men?

Mr Shanahan: Yes, sure. Look, I think I am talking about gender stereotypes here. I am basically referring to the fact that 40/50 years ago men had very simple roles and the survival skills were fairly clear in how they were to get by in some of those roles—that you needed certain skills to get by to be a breadwinner and so on.

Nowadays I believe that young men and men in general do need a broader range of skills to function in a more complicated world. There is a challenge for us as a community basically to enhance those skills and develop skills that are probably there and dormant, in a sense; that need to be brought out more in our education systems and through other means, like mentoring programs and so on.

Secondly I think there is an issue around isolation that has come up in our culture and I do feel that isolation is more prevalent. People are less likely to know their neighbours and all that sort of stuff. So there are challenges. Those skills in actually breaking isolation, like being able to say “g’day” and “hello” to people and get to know them, and the socialising skills and all that, are skills that are really important in strengthening us and making us more resilient.

MS DUNDAS: So what do you think we should be doing—mentoring programs?

Mr Shanahan: Well, all I can say is when people find out about a mentoring program, parents see that as a really valid solution—in fact, more often than not, more than counselling sometimes. They see that as a more solid long-term solution. The thing with counselling is you can go in and you can do an intervention that could be two to three months or whatever. But really that counsellor isn’t someone they know personally. It is not someone that builds strong long-term connections and a relationship at a personal level, other than in a therapeutic context.

MS DUNDAS: You said the parents value that. Do the young men value it?

Mr Shanahan: They certainly do. I should emphasise that mentoring is only one of many solutions, and not all young men want to go down that path. A lot do. And so for us there is a challenge of actually developing a range of solutions for young men.

MS DUNDAS: What is the range?

Mr Shanahan: Well, I think it is strengthening, like having more accessible school networks. For example, we could have mentoring programs at school. I mean, how many fathers actually have the time to be able to go into high schools and support them once they reach high school level? There seems to be more community at primary school. Suddenly you get this very strong culture in high schools which is far more distant and less community orientated and that is when you get a strengthening of peer group influence and so on, which can be great for young people—they can enjoy that. But I think life is about balance, too. I think having adult relationships and being able to enter into the adult world for young people is part of that growth and maturity. If they become too embraced in a peer group world without having strong adult connections, I think they are actually losing out on some important potentials into growing into adulthood, because we all do learn from each other and so on.

THE CHAIR: Did you say 25-year-olds? I would assume that the 25 years is a general thing and there are exceptions to the rule. But do you have people contacting your organisation who are—pick a figure—say 23 years old with a child and are having trouble coping?

Mr Shanahan: Yes, we get—

THE CHAIR: Single men with a child, for example?

Mr Shanahan: Yes, we certainly get that happening. They might contact us about some of the issues around that—if they are having problems in their relationship with their partner, or they are isolated, or they are experiencing some problems at work. Certainly

that issue around managing their emotional side of expressing anger and so on is a challenge sometimes, too.

THE CHAIR: Do you get any homeless young men?

Mr Shanahan: A few.

THE CHAIR: And how do you deal with that?

Mr Shanahan: We are not really geared a lot to do that, because there is a lot of running around, as you know, in ringing people and all that. So we are not really geared to doing a lot of that. What I try and do if there seem to be extensive issues in other areas, like getting on Centrelink and getting accommodation and all those sorts of things, is link them into another youth organisation. I suppose a good one that I have had some good dealings with would be the YWCA; with their CYOSS they have a one-to-one outreach service. Those workers are specifically skilled in targeting, knowing how to get into the bureaucracy of Centrelink and all of that stuff, which is a lot of work. So we try to hand them over to the people a bit more specialised in that area.

THE CHAIR: Okay, thank you very much.

Mr Shanahan: A pleasure. Thanks for your time.

THE CHAIR: It has been most helpful.

MS DUNDAS: Thank you.

JACQUELINE PEARCE and

ARA CRESSWELL were called.

THE CHAIR: Welcome. Whilst our terms of reference are centred around the issue of homeless men and their kids, there is the “any other matter” bit on the bottom that gives us a bit of licence. We wanted to get a handle on what sort of services should be provided if we were starting with a blank sheet of paper. Whilst it might not seem as though the experiences you folks go through every day are relevant to the terms of reference, we have a framework for saying, “What services can we test in the current system to see whether they are the sorts of things that must be brought into play?” If we see that they are not, we will know the direction the government ought to look in.

What we gain from what you folks tell us, someone else can apply to the issue. Whilst the number of homeless men and their accompanying children is not anywhere near the huge number of people coming to your organisations, we need to be on our guard should it become a growing issue. Now is the opportunity to introduce regimes which are not going to be banded. We can actually be putting the flags up, and that is why I was particularly keen to hear from you both.

I ask you now to identify yourselves and the organisations you represent and then open up with a statement.

Ms Pearce: My name is Jacqui Pearce. I am the Director of Toora Women Inc. I will just make a couple of brief points because, if you have got questions you would like to ask, that is probably a good way to go. One point I would like to make is that a gendered approach to service provision is really important, and I think it is fabulous in this community to see us starting to look at the need for services for men and for women and then for a diverse range of groups within that. It is incredibly important to have a gendered approach to service provision and to identify the differences between men and women in those areas and their particular requirements for support. It is also a way of ensuring positive and effective outcomes for people from the services that they access.

One thing that I raised in my submission was a clear need to identify need. If we are going to look at the requirement for services, that analysis of need across the spectrum is really important. That includes looking at the current crisis in existing crisis accommodation services, many of which are for women. At Toora in the last six months we turned away 300 women. In the last 12 months we were able to accommodate 300 women, but that was a more than 100 per cent increase over the previous six months, when we turned away 147 women. That is a pretty usual experience for most women’s and women’s and children’s refuges now. The demand is just skyrocketing. It is also a critical issue for families; there is a need across the spectrum.

Another service that Toora runs, WIREDD, which is a drug and alcohol service, does some work with young men and women in Quamby. One of the real issues that we encounter there is that the culture is not favourable to people moving on. We go in to do drug and alcohol support for young men and young women, but the environment prevents much positive outcome from occurring.

In some ways existing services do need to address some of the cultural factors—whether they are providing the sort of support that might mean that those young men and women move on to a better quality of life rather than continue to re-offend and stay in the system. Those are my points for now. I will hand over to Ara.

Ms Cresswell: My name is Ara Cresswell. I am from Beryl Women’s Refuge, which is a women and children’s refuge. It is one of the oldest women’s refuges in the country. Sadly, we are seeing third and fourth generation refuge children, and we are seeing third and fourth generation children of our own service. And my understanding, from talking to other services around the country, is that they are seeing the same thing. We take boys over the age of 12, which is unusual in the women’s refuge sector around the country. I will talk about them.

Before coming here last week we did a sample survey. Last week we turned away eight women, with 17 children. Two of those women were living in cars, and most of those women were homeless—we take women and children escaping domestic violence, so these women did not fit our criteria. But we did not have beds anyway. We do take homeless women if we have beds, but there generally are none. We turn away a lot of homeless families in which there are men, women and children, so we are seeing a dramatic increase in our turn-away figures on a daily basis.

We are noticing a huge lack of accommodation for women, with children, who have ongoing alcohol and drug needs and/or ongoing mental health needs. I spent all day yesterday with police, and that is not uncommon, because we take a lot of women with alcohol and drug problems who do not belong in a service for women and children escaping domestic violence.

I wanted to talk about the boys over the age of 12. One of the biggest areas that we work in is children. We had funding for one year to work with children, and that will end in a couple of days. We cannot keep doing that. Unless we work with children, we will never break the cycle of homelessness and domestic violence.

Right now sitting in our refuge is a young woman who was there five years ago as a child client with her mother, whose mother was at our refuge also. So we have had the grandmother, the mother, the daughter and now the daughter’s son with us. The woman who is with us with her child is escaping a boy who was also a child client of our service. They were not there together at the same time. She went on to become a victim of domestic violence; he went on to become a perpetrator of domestic violence.

We know when we get those figures—and we are seeing them more and more, and we are seeing them particularly for our indigenous families—that we are not breaking the cycle. We are providing safety—that is incredibly important—but until and unless we do some work with children, we will see them cycle through the youth refuge system and through the single women’s system and come back to us.

Many of our clients will tell us that they have been in refuges, either ours or others. Many of them will have been in as young people or with their mothers. Many of our women with children will come back to us, and they have been in other refuges usually escaping different men. So they might leave a relationship, but they will form another which is a domestic violence relationship.

If we do not work with the children now, we won't have an impact upon the service system in 10 and 15 years time. We must start dealing with some of the issues, particularly around children who come in and are disempowered after bearing witness to violence. Research shows that witnesses feature worse than those who have actually been beaten, and we have found that ourselves. Those who hid in the cupboard and watched mum get hurt are more damaged than those who copped a beating as well—because at least they can sport the bruises or broken arms and so do not feel quite so responsible. But those who were witnesses often do feel responsible. We have done a lot of work with boys over the age of 12.

THE CHAIR: Do they suffer guilt for not having been able to stop it?

Ms Cresswell: Absolutely. Dreadful guilt and dreadful shame. Lots of the work that we do with children is about fun, but it is also about doing things that build up a child's sense of self and their self-esteem and about making a child feel that he or she has a place in the world.

MS DUNDAS: Would this be important regardless of which parent the child is with?

Ms Cresswell: Absolutely—no question about it. Whether the children are with their fathers or their mothers, the work must be done with those children. We must be resourcing children. And we have sitting populations of them. We know that the children at risk are sitting in refuges.

Western Australia has a domestic violence counselling service specifically for children, and the children can go there whether they have been in a refuge or not. If they have been in a refuge they can continue coming back for a number of years. It is a service that keeps going for the child so that at some point, when that child is ready to break the cycle, the child can move on.

We have run camps for boys over the age of 12. We have a number of indigenous workers, and we have run specifically indigenous camps because most of our third and fourth generation clients are indigenous. We find that fun things that are around fishing and talking are more important than the actual sitting and doing counselling.

MS DUNDAS: A lot of people today have been talking about the need to keep family units together. In time of crisis, the children are more likely to want to stay with their parent, whichever one it is, because of the closeness you have in a family. With the programs that you are running with the children through the service and even with the older boys, do you think it is important that they are still sharing space with their parent all the time?

Ms Cresswell: Not all the time.

MS DUNDAS: I am not talking 24 hours.

Ms Cresswell: Yes.

MS DUNDAS: But they are still sharing accommodation. Even though you need to break the cycle, it is not by breaking the family unit.

Ms Cresswell: No. Sometimes that is inevitable, particularly when we get very violent boys, and that happens a lot. It is a really hard one for us when we have to separate a family and send a boy to another service because of the violence. Because we run a communal service that often happens. But it is also often because mum is at breaking point because of the violence.

I think staying together is really important and I believe strongly in working with boys and with men, but we have to start first working with children. We have got to do that.

One of the crises I foresee in the ACT is with a halfway house we have called Niandi that takes very large families, and it takes boys over the age of 12. We are at the point where that will probably close as an option for referral for the ACT community because it is not funded as a refuge; it is funded as a halfway house.

THE CHAIR: By the end of the month.

Ms Cresswell: Yes. That looks like being an alarm. We have spoken with a number of people, but for the Domestic Violence Crisis Service it is enormous. It is the one place where we can send a family with eight kids, because it is big enough. We have had boys who are 18, 19 or 20 years old who are still with their mums. The beauty of this place is that, because it is a lot bigger and is not as crowded as the other refuges, where whole families are in one room—and they are tiny rooms—the older kids actually study. There is a study area set aside, and they are able to do their school work. The closure of this refuge option will impact on homeless women and children; we will see an increase in those numbers.

MS DUNDAS: One of the points you raised in your submission was about young women with their fathers seeking crisis accommodation. We have spoken a lot about this age limit that exists: when it becomes unacceptable to have the young man in a women's refuge. It is becoming a lot more complicated with young women in a men's refuge. You posed a question in the submission. I was wondering if you wanted to expand on it—not necessarily answer it.

Ms Pearce: I am not sure I have the answer, but I think it is something that needs to be taken seriously and investigated. Given the statistics, we know that there is potential risk for young women of any age if they are accompanying men into crisis services for men and children. I do not think that is a reason not to do it, but I do think that how that happens needs to be considered. It is about accountability of service provision and ensuring that services are funded appropriately, that there are proper processes around that and that accountability measures are in place. Perhaps there is a requirement for addressing some of those age barriers as well.

MS DUNDAS: It ties in with the families staying together. If this is the only unit of the family left, how do we address that next level? You do not want to split off a young woman from the only family she has to then send her on a cycle—as you have discussed—of going through the refuges herself.

Ms Pearce: Absolutely not. Even how services are built is critical—whether it is a communal model as opposed to a cluster model. Having individual units for the family is slightly different to everyone living in the same area. There are a few issues that could be addressed there.

THE CHAIR: Correct me if I am wrong, but it seems to me that the crisis accommodation services that you guys provide—and, indeed, the ones that CANFACS are now doing—seem to be in a house provided for the purpose out of standard stock which is modified slightly. Is there a case for the government to start thinking about purpose-built housing?

Ms Cresswell: Yes.

THE CHAIR: We do it for drug and alcohol rehabilitation; we do it for older citizens. Isn't it time some of our massively forward-thinking bureaucrats started to develop, in conjunction with people like you, a model which can apply to both women and men—multimember families?

Ms Cresswell: Yes. In South Australia they have done it. They closed down all the women's refuges and rebuilt them so that they were cluster model houses. They had to amalgamate some services to do it. Going to South Australia we feel like poor relations. It is actually depressing to see their services because they are beautiful.

But in the ACT it is being done. Doris Women's Refuge operates from a cluster model. It operates; it is beautiful. They feel like they are getting phenomenal results because, instead of spending all their time mediating disputes, they are actually doing the real work—"How are your housing needs and health needs and security needs and what can we do with you?" Whereas at our service we spend more of our time mediating disputes than anything else.

Our services are, in fact, purpose built, but purpose built to an old model. My service was purpose built 11 to 12 years ago. It looked groovy and nice at that point in time compared to what it was.

THE CHAIR: Now, with the passage of time—

Ms Cresswell: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Am I correct in assuming that one of the casualties of this will be the integrity of the family unit, around which you seem to be building all of your support services and the success of which you say is your aim? Because of the architecture of what you have now, you are really having difficulty with the success rate.

Ms Cresswell: There is no doubt whatsoever. We have houses that are smaller than my own small three-bedroom house, and three families live in those. There can be 12 or 13 little children in one small three-bedroom house at any given time. Get 12 or 13 little children in a house with three different mothers—one who loves to clean, one who never cleans and one who has specific cultural needs—and you have set up a bonfire. Many of the women who go home go home because they say they cannot cope with the nature of the facilities; they would rather go back to violence.

There is a serious lack of accommodation for families who want to remain together: mother, father and children. We are working with the parents around what their issues are.

THE CHAIR: Using it as a time-out facility?

Ms Cresswell: Yes. Women come to us and their men go to Ainslie Village or to Samaritan House, and we know and they know that they want contact with the man. They want to work on the family dynamic, and we are in a situation where he cannot come to our service. We are not actually helping her to deal with whatever it is; there is just not enough family accommodation.

MS DUNDAS: Can I go back a step to the young women? You said that the issue of young women with homeless men needs to be explored. How do we explore that? Who do we talk to? Any suggestions?

Ms Cresswell: I do not know the answer to that. It is just not something I have come across. In many years I have dealt with one such young woman. Because the majority of sole-parent families are female-headed families, that is a hard one. It is also outside our realm. In the case of the one family I can think of that we dealt with, the young woman ended up both in Jacqui's service for some years and then in our service as a single parent. So it is not within my experience.

Ms Pearce: Talking with CANFACS about their experience and how they are approaching things might be a place to start—then canvassing views across the sector and the community and maybe doing some research nationally or even internationally to look at these issues and how they have been addressed elsewhere.

I am sure this is not the first crisis accommodation service for men and children, so there must be some things happening somewhere that we could draw on, at least as a starting point. There must be points that could go into a discussion paper or at least open up the debate so that we can develop some responses that are adequate and appropriate for the situation.

MS DUNDAS: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Because the numbers do not amount to a critical mass, which would give it the publicity that it is due, the few people who are suffering from this issue that we are now looking at will continue to suffer and their issues will be exacerbated. The same issues your services are facing, they will face twice as much because they have not got the strength in numbers to say, "Excuse me, we need help."

If you do not have a critical mass, the problem will not get a high enough priority to get someone to check it out. That is one of the reasons we decided to take this one on, knowing full well that the numbers of homeless men and their kids would pale into insignificance compared with the numbers that are going through your services.

Ms Cresswell: The numbers that we are turning away on a daily basis.

THE CHAIR: Indeed, yes. Where do they go, Ara? Where do they go?

Ms Cresswell: We have women come to us from off the mountain. They sleep rough. We recently had a woman come to us—in this weather, with six children, no shoes and sleeping rough—knocking at the door at 8 o'clock in the morning.

THE CHAIR: The reason I was flipping through my stuff earlier on was to find this reference—a United Nations definition of what homelessness is. There are about five points, and one that is not there is a person having no roof at all.

I can recall being horrified at the number of syringes I was finding around the place. This was when I first came into this chamber four years ago, and I went up on City Hill to see if I could see any discarded needles. I saw discarded people up there and I found, just within 20 metres of the theatre building, three places where people actually live. Yet that is not in that definition.

Ms Cresswell: We took in a woman last week, who finally got a bed. It is criminal that women go on a waiting list to escape domestic violence—"I need to leave now"; "Well, I'm sorry, but you're going on a waiting list, and you'll get a bed in three or four weeks time"—but that is what happens. When she rang and we said "We've got a room for you", she said "Thank God, because he shot out the windows of the car, and we have been so cold the last two weeks." So she had been in the car for two weeks with her children and, because he had shot the windows out of the car, they were now really cold and they were really anxious.

This is not unusual; it is not rare; it is not something that only happens once in a blue moon. It is happening more and more. I am sure you have heard that the flats in town will accommodate up to 16 people in the night—because they sleep in wardrobes. Wherever anyone can get a bed, they will get a bed. The hard part is when we see women with larger numbers of kids, the ones who have got five or more. We see plenty of families where there are eight, nine, 10 kids. It is impossible; there are no places for them to go to. Many women say that they stayed and incurred dreadful injuries because there was nowhere to go. They kept ringing, but there was nowhere for them to go.

Ms Pearce: I have recently been talking to some of the youth street workers recently, and they have been observing that lots of young women are taking up with older men who have housing because it means they get a bed. The relevance of the relationship and how safe it is do not come into it.

THE CHAIR: That is secondary.

Ms Pearce: It is actually a ticket to having somewhere to live.

Ms Cresswell: If we really want to be serious about homelessness in the future, we have to look at early intervention today. We have got to start early intervention and start breaking some of those patterns around homelessness, which really does look intergenerational, and around domestic violence, which is clearly intergenerational—the research is all there. If we actually got serious about it, we would not need to keep increasing the services the way we need to at the moment.

THE CHAIR: One of the reasons why I was keen to have a chat with you was that it strikes me that homelessness is a manifestation of the problem. It is a symptom; it is not actually the cause of the issue. The problem you guys get when people turn up is how to fix this thing and give this person a forward direction, some supports and some hopes so that they can then go off and fix themselves.

We have heard the word on the prevention stuff before. You were talking about getting to the kids. We have heard that sort of thing quite a bit. Are you in the non-government sector? I will use that as a generic term for a minute. Are you being left alone to address that preventative thing? Is there a hole in the governmental bureaucratic attention? Is that a gap that they should actually be addressing, instead of trying to continually fix things like homelessness and crisis accommodation? Should they be focusing more of their resources on that front end?

Ms Cresswell: It goes both ways. You have got to reach people where they feel safe—so it has got to be somewhere they feel safe. We would say that, unless we do some outreach with people, we are taking up crisis beds that do not need to be taken up, particularly around mental health. If we could go out and access some of the clients that end up in our services early, they would not end up losing their places, they would not end up going off their medication and they would not end up in hospital and back in crisis services.

Much of service delivery can be relapse prevention. That area is somewhere that could be addressed, but it needs to be where they feel safe. While there is provision of some government services, the clients will sometimes not go to something called “mental health services” or “alcohol and drug services”, but they will go to services like ours where they know people and they know it is all right to go in and say “Hey, I messed up again. I went down the tube again, and now I need more help.”

Jacqui needs to answer that as well because we deal with very different folk, although there is some crossover. We definitely need a more supportive and cohesive system, but we need to strengthen the community sector and we need to strengthen the base where the client group who are the most marginalised feel safe.

Ms Pearce: I know that governments and departments are starting to talk more about early intervention, and it cannot be an either/or thing. There needs to be early intervention, there need to be resources in prevention and there needs to be some crisis support. For quite a long way into the future there is going to be a need for crisis beds.

Outreach is critical in keeping people from coming back to crisis. Lots of women come back who would not need to if there was some minimal support out there. Sometimes that move to independence needs some support, although it does not need crisis support any more. It would be exactly the same, no matter who the person. They would need that continuum of support. The thinking is moving that way more and more, which I am encouraged by. Some of the thinking is quite new. Even though the words have been around for a while, people are only just starting to get a handle on what that might look like as a continuum of service provision.

THE CHAIR: You have given me heaps of food for thought, and I am very grateful to you for sharing those things with us. It is important for us to get a real feel for issues surrounding women. I suspect that the success you have had is due to your own strength and your own innovation rather than to somebody being really good to you at the beginning. If we can make sure that that sort of inattention does not happen to this smaller group, then we will be successful in what we are trying to do. So thanks again.

Ms Pearce: Thank you.

Ms Cresswell: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: We have still got two more witnesses to go, and we are actually 20 minutes behind. I would like to do some catching up, so I propose we grab a cup of coffee and bring it in.

Short adjournment

RUSSELL WALLS and

MICHAEL BLYTH

were called.

THE CHAIR: Gentlemen, thank you very much for sparing us your time. I am sorry that we are a little bit delayed. I do like us to stick to time but I have never been able to do so since I started in this job.

You have before you a card which I am required to read. These hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections, but also certain responsibilities. You are protected from certain legal actions, such as being sued for defamation for what you say at a public hearing. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell the committee the truth. Of course, that would be taken for granted, I suppose. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter. I am obliged to read that out. We have before the Assembly a number of very sensitive inquiries at the moment with a number of in-camera hearings, so we are being a little bit pedantic about that sort of stuff.

Gentlemen, could I ask you to make an opening statement and we will go into questions with you after that. But before you do, for the purposes of Hansard, which is doing the recording, I would ask you to identify yourselves and indicate the organisation that you represent. I also advise you that these proceedings are being broadcast throughout the Assembly electronic network and through certain public service offices as well—so people could be eavesdropping in their offices. Having said that, I would invite you to start off.

Mr Walls: Thank you Mr Chairman, and thank you for the opportunity for St Vincent de Paul to address this committee. My name is Russell Walls and I am the president of St Vincent de Paul. With me is Mr Michael Blyth, who is the president of Samaritan House, which is our homeless men's refuge in Hackett.

It may assist the committee if I made some broad statements on the role and function of St Vincent de Paul in the ACT. I, as the president, head up an organisation of 100 staff and about 1,000 volunteers. Michael and I are two of those 1,000 volunteers. In the ACT context we help 26,000 needy people a year. We do that primarily through 11,000 home visitations where we go to see needy or disadvantaged people in their homes and in local suburbs and assist them with their needs.

We have 30 centres of charity in this archdiocese, of which about a dozen are here in Canberra. We have 54 local conferences, which are basically suburbs or parishes, of which there are about 30 conferences in the ACT. Within the ACT we have seven special works that look at specific areas of need within the community. We have four youth conferences that assist and support disadvantaged children in this community.

We assist young carers, as young as nine and 12 years of age, who may be the prime carer in a family and we take around 600 young people on camps each year through those youth conferences. Often it is to give some respite to those young people to get them away for a week or two; to give them a break from their hard program across most of the year. So those youth programs are also very important to us in supporting disadvantaged youth. And we have about 60 youth volunteers that support that program.

So that is the broad scope of what we are doing. Some of these activities are related specifically to homeless men and, indeed, homeless men with children. A lot of them are in the other and related activity, where we mightn't be supporting homeless men and their children in a formal sense under SAAP but we certainly are assisting them through those 60 or 70 local conferences in an outreach program to try and get them back on their feet.

I will go through the five SAAP funded services in the ACT, and there is also one in nearby Goulburn. We have Samaritan House, which is at Hackett and that is our homeless men's refuge where males over the age of 18 years who are without children are accommodated. We accommodate 12 men there most nights of the year. I should say in relation to Samaritan House that we are turning away at present about 180 men each month, which is about 75 per cent of the people that come to the door. So what we have done is identify what we regard as an area of greatest need. The homeless men's shelter or refuge that we have at Hackett accommodates 12 men a night, and what we are suggesting is that we ought to be creating a similar service, or a mirror service, on the south side of the ACT.

THE CHAIR: Whereabouts would you place that?

Mr Walls: I think you would want to put it close to a centre of transportation, if that was possible, or certainly in an area that is well serviced by public transport.

THE CHAIR: Say somewhere like Woden or Tuggeranong Town Centre.

Mr Walls: I would say Woden is probably an ideal location for that particular service. But as I say, according to all the indicators in the work that we are doing at the moment—and we do support, as I say, 26,000 people in this town—one of the bigger dimensions that we are seeing is homeless men.

MS DUNDAS: Are you able to support 180 men a month that you turn away through your outreach?

Mr Walls: Anybody that we have to turn away—if there is no room at the end we just won't shove them out the door. We do go to other services to see what can be done. We may refer that person to one of our local conferences to assist them very much in the short term. And that could be in terms of food or clothing or some sort of shelter. It may be simply a caravan that is available in this town. It may be that we assist somebody by paying their fare to go to some other centre or some other town that may enable them to recover from their situation. But at the moment it is a big dimension in what we are seeing in terms of area of need. Once a week we will turn away a homeless man who has a child or children.

I will just go on and give you the other related sort of activities we have. We have two women's refuges or services in town, both of them on the south side. One is Caroline Chisholm and the other is Monica House. Caroline Chisholm provides immediate accommodation for women in crisis, particularly for women who are subject to domestic violence. Monica House provides short-term supportive accommodation for three to six months for women who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. That is a bit outside your scope.

St Jude's Family Service is out in Tuggeranong. We have six houses out in Gordon which give priority to ACT residents who are couples or single parents, male or female, with legal custody of children, at least one of whom is under 18 years of age. The families must be homeless or at imminent risk of homelessness. So in that context we would help homeless men and children.

We have a night patrol service, which is a new initiative of St Vincent de Paul. It has been in operation just short of one year, and that goes out on Canberra streets at night. One of the reasons we took that initiative was what we were seeing in terms of the turn aways from Samaritan House and the area of need where people cannot find suitable or appropriate accommodation. We are seeing 120 people a night—

THE CHAIR: Can you describe what that service does?

Mr Walls: Yes I can. As I said, it is a new initiative and it is something that was being initiated by St Vincent de Paul. Its aim is to engage people on the streets at night, offering friendship, support and compassion, and offering them some refreshments and a listening ear. It is not a counselling service as such, but it is a mobile outreach service. It is serviced by, or supported by, 100 volunteers who have put their hands up specifically to staff this particular service, and it is managed by a volunteer committee and full-time paid coordinator.

We initially started the service based on two nights a week, Friday and Saturday nights. We have just increased it to three nights—it is now going out on a Thursday night. The expectations are, because of the increased demand, we will increase it beyond those three nights. The volunteers serve in excess of 120 cups of coffee, tea, Milo or soup each night. But the main thing is they are a listening ear to needy people in this town, and a source of advice or point of contact where they have particular needs. So they are a point of referral which, again, might be back to one of our local conferences or it may be to some other community service in this town.

THE CHAIR: Mr Walls, these people are listening to the stories of people on the streets. Do you collect the stories to see whether or not pictures are emerging?

Mr Walls: We do collect some of them. It is not within our resources to collect all of them. I can tell you the names of the people on the street. I have taken within recent weeks a member of the federal parliament to see these people, and they are there most weeks. There are people that will wait in their car at Dickson till my patrol arrives, and last time they greeted me with the words "you're late".

I don't go out on this service every week but I do go out occasionally just to see what is happening out there. We are seeing disadvantaged people, we are seeing mentally ill people, and we are seeing lonely people. We are seeing people across the whole age spectrum from young kids at high risk—young girls of 11 years of age out on the streets at night inadequately clothed for this climate, and without the protection of an adult.

We see elderly men who don't have any sign of illness. They are just lonely and want somebody to talk to. We see what you might call street people or people who are living in supported accommodation somewhere and who will come for some sort of assistance or help. And we will see people with delusions or with mental illness.

I should say in the context of mental illness that 75 per cent of the people that St Vincent de Paul deals with in a homeless refuge are suffering from some form of mental illness. At one end of the spectrum it could be depression: at the other end it is something much more serious. We see people in that situation where their identification tells us that they should be 300 kilometres north from where they are at that point in time. They don't have any money, they don't have accommodation and they have got nowhere to go. And that concerns me. It concerns me when we are turning away 180-odd homeless men each week as to where they are going to go. And in that context the Society did write to the ACT government in recent times just identifying this area of what we call greatest need, and it is in the homeless men's arena.

Mr Blyth: I think in Samaritan House in particular we have seen quite a pattern emerge over recent years in relation to the condition of the men and mental illness or, I guess, conditions related to substance abuse that have affected their mental condition. Whether diagnosed or not, it is certainly an increasing focus. We have a number of men coming to us who have dual diagnosis and it is putting increasing pressure on us to be able to accommodate them effectively and work in with the various mental health services and other health services relating to alcohol and drug abuse and so on.

We do our best to try and help them to take that next step, which in some cases can be quite a challenge because often the infrastructure is not complementary to the needs of the individual. But it has been quite, I guess, a revelation in recent times to see just how many of the men who front are affected by some form of mental condition, if you like—not necessarily diagnosed, but you can see evidence that they are not necessarily fully capable of looking after themselves perhaps as someone who is in a better situation may be able to.

THE CHAIR: Can I ask: in terms of the turn aways, 180 people a week is a staggering figure. Are they 180 different people or are they the same people coming back and being knocked back.

Mr Walls: You could be. About 10 per cent of people that we see present themselves a second time. You might see 10 per cent presenting themselves a second time. Of the 180, I would say with certainty that most of them aren't in that category, that they are first time people that we would see.

THE CHAIR: How many of those would have children with them?

Mr Blyth: Well, I guess we would turn away on average one man a week who has kids. I think Samaritan House is well known amongst the homeless men or the men looking for crisis accommodation. And I think it is also well known—the word gets around—that it is for single men. There are a number of transients who come through Canberra. They are connected with family who is here or they are on the move to somewhere else, travelling and what have you, who may be travelling with kids and then looking for accommodation. It is not possible for us in that environment to actually accommodate children.

THE CHAIR: Because your service is for single men, you clearly don't keep stats on things that are not within your terms of reference. But I was after your impression. Do people who have kids actually knock on your door because they don't know where else to go, and if so what sort of a number would you be looking at there—the people you would actually try and get referred on to somewhere else for assistance?

Mr Blyth: I guess if anyone knocks on the door and we can't accommodate them, we do our best to refer them to another facility whether they have children or not. As Russ said, we have our St Jude's in Gordon. If there is a possibility of accommodating them there then we would refer them there in the first instance. There would be other such services available. We may even go to the extent in an emergency of assisting them to find accommodation just on a short-term basis, say in a motel in Canberra—low cost accommodation—or a hotel either in Canberra or in Queanbeyan.

So we do our best. The coordinator of the house and the staff have very good networks with other services in the ACT and the surrounding region. And also as Russ said, if it is suitable and they can travel and it sort of fits in with their plans, we can assist them to connect with family in another town.

Mr Walls: The statistics that we are keeping at the moment show us what the turn away is each night of the week, and that information is available to the committee if you would like to have it.

THE CHAIR: We would appreciate it.

Mr Walls: I am looking at the statistics for May of 2002, which is last month, and the figure was 164 turn aways. That can vary from, say, a low of about two to a high of about 12 on any single night. So there is a consistent—

THE CHAIR: And never a night goes by without you having to turn someone away?

Mr Walls: No.

Mr Blyth: It would be rare.

Mr Walls: There are 12 people located and accommodated in Samaritan House every night of the week. We bring those people in and we give them a game plan. We set some objectives with them—some mutual sort of obligation thing—to decide whether they need accommodation or need a job or whatever their objectives are. We work with them towards those objectives over the three weeks. Often you will find it may be that we are transitioning them to somewhere like Ainslie Village; or if we can't get them in there we

would advocate on their behalf to send them somewhere else; or we would refer them to one of our local conferences who would work with them in finding some solution.

MS DUNDAS: Are you seeing men who are coming through families? Are you only seeing the sons of fathers who may have come through before? Are you seeing the family cycle kind of—

Mr Blyth: Well, that could be true. I guess it is difficult for us to identify that. Samaritan House, for example, has only been in existence for seven years.

MS DUNDAS: Do you see that the men who are coming have a family history of their parents needing to go into crisis accommodation or there being a family history of violence?

Mr Walls: I think what you are saying is there is a generational sort of aspect to this. It is not so noticeable in the context of Samaritan House. But I think in terms of some of the services that we are providing more broadly across the community, it is a significant factor.

MS DUNDAS: Do you have more information on that?

Mr Blyth: I guess you could say that most of the men who come through—we take men from the age of 18—are over 25. Most of them have kids. So I suppose in one sense, if you like, it is the next generation that might be where the real issue is.

MS DUNDAS: That is what my next question was about. You did mention in your submission that the majority of men who come through Samaritan House are fathers themselves.

Mr Blyth: Yes.

MS DUNDAS: Are you able to work with these men in their role as fathers and being able to work with their children; and does your outreach service then key in with those children? Is there work there?

Mr Blyth: Well, I guess in association with other agencies, we can assist in that but it is difficult. I suppose we can facilitate it to the extent that we can. Perhaps at Samaritan House, from time to time it might be appropriate but it is not necessarily geared up for those kinds of visits with children. But if we can do something to assist in that we will, and if we can help through agencies like Marymead, for example, where the kids can be accommodated perhaps independently, then we can arrange for the father to visit there.

So it is best that the children's protection is looked after in the first instance. We can ensure that that is the case, and then we can allow the facilitation of the visit from the father. It's probably best for him to go where they are located rather than them coming to, say, Samaritan House.

MS DUNDAS: When men show up looking for a bed, is their relationship with their children a key factor for them? Is it something that—

Mr Blyth: Yes. Well, I guess it is.

MS DUNDAS: I know that I am asking for a broad over sweeping statement, but what feeling do you get from the fathers about their relationship with their children? We have had a lot of information today about that cycle, the generational cycle, continuing on with generations of people going through crisis with repeat domestic violence and those kinds of things. How do you see the fathers shouldering responsibility for I guess that generational—

Mr Blyth: I guess it wouldn't be fair for me to answer that question perfectly. But, if you are willing, we could provide you with specific information on that to give you an idea of the sort of range of fathers who come to Samaritan House. As I said, some of them are probably not capable of demonstrating responsibility. Others would be quite passionate if they are coming out of a situation where there is some tension within the family. And often the concern is access to children. Those men are going to be very keen to try to restore harmony so that they can get access back to the family and the children.

There can be other cases where men have been removed from their children because of their situation. For example, we have men coming to us from the remand centre or from Goulburn jail, so they may be in transition. It could be that the next step for them is reunion with their family. If there are issues associated with that then perhaps we can help through counselling or giving them access to the sort of counselling that they might need to establish or re-establish the union with their family, given that there has been some period of separation.

MS DUNDAS: Those kind of steps need to be initiated by the father?

Mr Blyth: When fathers or men come to us, we sit down with them and identify what their immediate needs are. Often their most immediate need is just somewhere warm, some shelter, to have a shower and get clean, and sort of get thinking straight. But then it will come around to what the life issues are for them. If that is about reunion with the family, if that is about finding a job, if that is about finding somewhere stable to live, then we start to work and put that plan into practice.

If it is about dealing with an issue, if anger is a big issue in their life, there are some specific things that we can do to help them both. We have programs we run internally with our case management—we have a case manager at Samaritan House—or there are programs that we can help them with externally. We can refer them to medical attention, psychologists and general practice; we can refer them to the various services that are available through the ACT Health and Community Care.

MS DUNDAS: What is the average length of stay?

Mr Blyth: Interestingly we have a period of up to three weeks as our stipulated time. The average period currently is around 10 days. We don't force people to stay for any time longer than they feel comfortable. We get about 10 per cent repeat visits. We have had a number of guys come who have come many times. But most of them tend to get that bit of respite in their life, and they move on. Some of them are quite successfully resettled, others we never see again, and then we do get a few repeats. But at the moment it is 10 days, which is about half, if you like, of the time that they are able to stay with us.

Mr Walls: We set a period of three weeks. That is so that we can establish a goal, plan and some clear objectives. It has been suggested to us we should keep people for much longer, even three months or six months. But if you look at it in the context of us turning away 180—

THE CHAIR: Your turn away rate would be pretty high then, wouldn't it?

Mr Walls: a month, you would not deal with the issue. Clearly the most effective way of dealing with this issue is to set that three-week barrier and then work with the individual to achieve their goals. And as Mr Blyth has said, the average time of stay is 10 days. So that demonstrates to us that that is clearly the most effective way to go about it. What we need to do is—

THE CHAIR: You actually touched on something that I was interested in. There is a bit of a thread running through some of this sort of thing. I was just wondering whether or not if the service is too comfortable and too effective there would be a nice little comfort zone. People would be a little bit less inclined to move on if there wasn't a strict regime of achievement against agreed targets, if you like, and then the assistance with your luggage on the way out.

Mr Walls: The game plan is essential in that it gives them a path and a framework through which they can work towards achieving their goals. And we can work with them towards those particular goals.

THE CHAIR: It would appear that if you have got the possibility of staying three weeks and you are out in 10 days then something is happening quite positively.

Mr Walls: It is working.

Mr Blyth: It is always a challenge to know how effective it is, because once they go it is often difficult to maintain contact. We do regular surveys.

THE CHAIR: Although you have got a 10 per cent return rate.

Mr Blyth: Yes.

THE CHAIR: That is like reverse recidivism, isn't it?

Mr Blyth: That's true. So it is an indicator that in fact something is working and it is working reasonably well. The guests themselves that we have certainly give us good feedback and they help us in making sure that we are addressing their needs as effectively as possible. We also monitor the conditions, if you like, the situation that the men are in, and each year as part of our management plan we have a specific focus. In recent times, for example, we have looked at the issue of depression and the whole issue of, I guess, mental conditions. We have looked at anger in recent times and put together focus groups for the men to talk about the types of issues.

We also focus on our staff to make sure that they are trained and kept current in terms of the needs of the men that come through. And as those needs change, because there is a dynamic there, we make sure that we have either access to those kinds of services or we invest in training of our own staff to support the guests' needs.

THE CHAIR: Do you have any more questions, Ms Dundas?

MS DUNDAS: No.

THE CHAIR: Gentlemen, thank you very much. You did offer to give us some other information.

Mr Blyth: We could do that, yes.

THE CHAIR: I will take you up on that, if I may.

Mr Blyth: Yes.

THE CHAIR: What is our deadline for this inquiry? We don't have one, do we?

MS DUNDAS: No.

THE CHAIR: Isn't that lovely. So at your leisure.

Mr Blyth: We will endeavour to respond to you—

THE CHAIR: We do want to get on and make recommendations to the Assembly, but don't feel that you are under any pressure of time. A couple of weeks would be fine. I think we will be a bit busy with estimates anyway.

Mr Walls: I would suggest then that if the committee secretary could make contact with us with your specific questions, we will respond in a timely way.

THE CHAIR: Lovely. Thank you very much. And thank you very much for your time. We appreciate it very much.

BARRY COLIN WILLIAMS was called.

THE CHAIR: Hello, Barry. First of all, thank you very much for sparing us the time. We do appreciate it. I am obliged to read this card out. I don't know if you've been following the news recently but there are other inquiries the Assembly is doing at the moment which have been of some delicacy and required in-camera hearings, so the Assembly has become a little bit more sensitive to certain things. So I am obliged to read this card out, if you could bear with me.

Mr Williams : Yes.

THE CHAIR: It is in front of you, if my ramblings don't make sense to you. You should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the Legislative Assembly, protected by parliamentary privilege. That gives you certain protections but also certain responsibilities. It means that you are protected from certain legal actions, such as being sued for defamation for what you say at this public hearing. It also means that you have a responsibility to tell the committee the truth. Giving false or misleading evidence will be treated by the Assembly as a serious matter.

Before we get on, as I mentioned to you in our past chats, we are going to stick to the terms of reference. We can stray into other related matters, but one which we cannot stray into is the contract of service, as you know. And the reason I say that is not that the committee doesn't want to hear it; it's just that the Assembly made its views known particularly strongly in the course of the debate.

Mr Williams : Yes, I understand.

THE CHAIR: So if we do start to stray into that I'll have to bring us back. So I will invite you to make an opening statement and then we can throw questions back and forth. Before you do, could you state your name and the organisation you represent, for the purpose of Hansard.

Mr Williams : My name is Barry Williams and I represent the Lone Fathers Association and Parents Without Partners.

THE CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you very much. I'll throw it to you now to open up.

Mr Williams : Well, as you're quite aware, we've been around for 29 years and we've seen this problem about homelessness in Canberra for quite many years—even when the Labor government was in power before and all through the previous government. And, as you're quite aware, we lobbied and got a service set up.

Well, that service is no longer going now, in our view. It's not being utilised as what it was set up for. The problem is twofold, increasing every time. Even though we're not running that service, I'm still the contact person for it and I'm getting the calls because the government made a mistake and put my name in the telephone book and in all the things. The department has said, well, seeing I get a \$10,000 grant to run Lone Fathers I should be taking the calls and referring them. But these calls are coming all hours of the night—two and three a night sometimes, some nights through the week, and even the

weekend. It's very traumatic to hear people out in the streets in Canberra, some with children, some with no children, in the cold and nowhere to go.

Now they contact us and say, "The reason we're contacting you is that you're the only 24-hour service. If we contact Lifeline they put us on to you. If we contact Salvation Army, they have an answering service which says, 'Ring back on Monday morning'." So I'd just like in my—

THE CHAIR: So you're identifying a big need right there—the government needs to address the issue of 24-hour contact for homeless men, with or without kids, in crisis.

Mr Williams: That's right.

THE CHAIR: Good.

Mr Williams: Since we lost the service on 31 January, we've had well over 200 documented calls from people in crisis for accommodation. They keep coming every day. I do my best to refer them to the people who took over the service, but the feedback we're getting is they are not 24 hours, and no-one can contact them—either they're full all the time or, the same as Samaritan House, they can only take a certain amount of people. They seem to be full all the time. I do try to send them to other areas, such as Father Michael in Queanbeyan, such as the Salvation Army, but the Salvation Army have stated that they're taking up to eight men a night and turning 12 away, if I remember the right figure.

So it's a terrible situation. From my own studies around Australia, Canberra's got the worst area of homeless people in Australia per capital city.

THE CHAIR: These calls you get at various times of the day—you were saying sometimes there are two or three at night. How many of those, say over a month, would be the same people contacting you more than once?

Mr Williams: Probably not a great amount. I usually put their name down and I tell them, "We no longer have a service but I'll put you on to this. It's the only thing I can do for you." They always say, "Well, we've been on to most of them." So I tell them, "Well, you've got to go to the police then because you can't be sleeping on the street," and stuff like that. No, I'd say not many at all. Very few.

THE CHAIR: Other people have given evidence about these really large numbers—the St Vincent De Paul people were talking about 180 a month that are knocked back. I thought, "Well, I wonder how many of those are people who've done the rounds of the traps and they're going around again in the same month. But I get the feeling that that's not a great deal. It's only about 10 per cent, I think the gentlemen said.

Mr Williams: Well, even when we had the service early in the year and last year, we were virtually most times full and turning away, I think, something like 12 a week. But of course the way we ran it was this: we had it so men with their children could come in for three weeks—and a maximum of five—so that we could do their case study and help them into other alternative accommodation, which we found we were very successful at.

But the situation is that thing doesn't run now, so people are not getting that opportunity. Because we're the only 24-hour service, we probably get more calls than most people.

THE CHAIR: If I hear what you're saying correctly, is it your opinion that the nature of the service that you were providing is in fact different to that of the service which is provided by CANFACS? Am I right in assuming that possibly we have a need to provide both types of services?

Mr Williams: I'm positively sure, and I've always said that. Because we were so full all the time, we were applying to have another service in the south side—on the same level as we run it on the north side because, as I said earlier, when we were full we were turning away up to 12 people a week.

THE CHAIR: And the number of people that you were taking in?

Mr Williams: Well, the house only had four bedrooms, and I know at one stage there we had 11 people. The rooms were big enough to have two people to a room.

THE CHAIR: You got 100 per cent turnaway?

Mr Williams: Yes.

THE CHAIR: That seems to suggest that, if they're not the same people going around the traps a number of times, if you open up another service exactly the same then you'd probably be right.

Mr Williams: Yes. This might be getting off the track a bit, but it's not only men, and it's not only men with children. Now we've got the problem of housing for single parents too, which is a big problem. There are 3,000 people, I believe, waiting on the housing list, and even this morning I was in at a review with people trying to get a man with two children a house, because his children are separated. Until he can get a house they won't give him the other child back.

It is a serious situation and it should not happen. I was on the housing task force in the early years when I was starting out, and I've been involved in it all the way through for 29 years. I do know that it's not getting better; it's getting worse.

THE CHAIR: Given that your expertise is in sort of lone fathers, in men, do you get any sort of a feel for how many of those men are older men suffering from elder abuse that have just run away from it all and turn to you?

Mr Williams: Well, unfortunately, we never ever see many men over 55. As I heard someone say before—they were talking about domestic violence—we got very few cases over all the people we had. In the time we had the shelter we had 100 men and 60 kids go through in two years and seven months. As I said, we had them for three weeks.

The majority of the age would be around, at the most, 55, and very few of those were from domestic violence situations. Whereas people were trying to make out they all had problems with domestic violence, the ones we had, they claimed they were escaping with their kids from domestic violence and things like that.

I think we might have only had, that I can remember, half a dozen at the most that we were asked by the police to take because there was a domestic violence issue.

MS DUNDAS: Sorry, the police would ring you and say, “Can you take this man?”

Mr Williams : Yes.

MS DUNDAS: To take him out of a house where he was being violent.

Mr Williams : No, not out of the house. They would say that he’s been put out of the house on an order and he has nowhere to go and they have nowhere to place him—would we take him? We’re still getting calls from the police. They don’t know that this service has taken over. I’m still getting calls from the police, from Centrelink and from Lifeline.

MS DUNDAS: What did you do with those men specifically—the ones who had orders against them?

Mr Williams : Well, we took them in. We got them counselling. One of our workers was a college counsellor, and he spoke with them, and we helped them as much as we could and got them back on their feet and stuff like that.

We had a great record, as people were saying, encouraging people to resume their relationships, but then the department came in and said, “Well, that’s not your job,” but we thought, “It is my job, because that’s what I’ve been doing for nearly 30 years, trying to help people resolve their crisis.”

MS DUNDAS: Following on from that, what procedures did you have in place, and how did they work, about the children in the house, especially young girls? What procedures did you follow in terms of the mix of people in the house, those kinds of things?

Mr Williams : How did they get on sort of thing or—

MS DUNDAS: Well, did you have any particular procedures in place or rules that were laid down for—

THE CHAIR: The interaction between them.

MS DUNDAS: Yes, for the interaction, because you’d have, you said, four bedrooms and a mix of people there. You’d have men who didn’t have any children, with other people’s children around them. For managing those relationships, what procedures were there?

Mr Williams : Well, they all were quite good because they all sort of worked in together and we had a roster for the kitchen and stuff like that. When we had female children over there we always had one of our female members even stay over there to all hours of the night until the children went to bed. At one stage there, when I wasn’t too sure about one person, I had a woman stay over there all night and stuff like that.

MS DUNDAS: You were able to manage any problems before they arose?

Mr Williams : Well, we never really had any serious problems. We never had a child hurt, we never had a person hurt there. Virtually, the only trouble we ever had there was one man brought alcohol in. He knew our rules: if you bring alcohol or drugs in—there's no excuse—you're gone immediately. We had to send him to Samaritan House. Samaritan House will know about that, and he went down to Samaritan House, tried to run Samaritan House for them; that's the sort of person he was. But that's the only real trouble we ever had there.

MS DUNDAS: So you were able to manage quite well the interaction between men and other people's children?

Mr Williams : Yes. I think the reason why we were able to do that was that we've all been through the situation and we know how to speak to people in that situation. You've got to be able to speak to people at their level and not try to show that you know better than they do. You've got to be able to bring them in and just show them where they're going wrong or whatever, but do it in a nice way. I think we were very professional at that and I think that's why we never had any problems at all. Because we were definitely alcohol and drug free, anyone that came under the influence immediately had the alcohol taken away.

MS DUNDAS: So how did you screen or decide? If you've got 10 people knocking on your door, how do you know—

Mr Williams : Because every person who came had to have a police check, and we had a very good record. We worked it out with the police; it usually takes 24 hours. The police agreed with us for getting this service and said we would get an answer from them within three-quarters of an hour to an hour. We would take the person's details down and we'd fax it off to the police and the police would fax back and tell us what record they had, if any, and whether they were a suitable person to go into that.

MS DUNDAS: And so you'd be able to monitor the mix of people in the house?

Mr Williams : Yes. There were very few we had to turn away, very few. We did this to protect the children because, with paedophilia and stuff going around, we had to do that and protect ourselves at the same time.

MS DUNDAS: Samaritan House mentioned that they had people coming from Goulburn jail and the remand centre.

Mr Williams : No, we never got any of those, no. They were just mainly people in Canberra. In lots of marriage breakdowns now, the second family's breaking up. I'm a marriage celebrant. 47 per cent of first marriages break up; and, for the second marriage, it's one in every two, because people rush into marriages too quickly. They've usually got children—both got children from previous marriages. It might be the lady might own the house and they might have an argument; she might tell him to get out and take your kids. Well, he's got nowhere to go. We've got a lot of cases like that.

MS DUNDAS: In your submission you refer specifically to the need of men who don't have custody of their children but who are trying or working to establish an ongoing relationship, custodial or revisitation. How do you work with men through Lone Fathers who are doing that, and was the house when you ran it capable of dealing with kids on visitation? The service that you ran, was there scope in the house for fathers to take their kids for the weekend, if that was their visitation agreement?

Mr Williams: Yes. We had a rule that if there was a room available, and the father could have access, and the other parent agreed, the child could come over there and spend the day with the father, either in the television room or out the back—we had playgrounds—or they could go over there and just be with the father and the father could use that place as a starting point. Then he could take the child out for the day and stuff like that. We had a rule that we wanted people to be in by 8 o'clock and, if they were not, they had to ring us to tell us so we'd know where they were, especially if they had kids and we had extended that service to them. We never ever had any problems; it worked well.

The people who'd come through there were so grateful, I think, that we never had a problem. They knew that they could talk to me, the manager or the caretaker and, if they had a problem—they might have had a girl child or something—then we had a heap of members that put up their hands from both organisations to help. There were lady members to help us, and they were helping all the time and stuff like that.

MS DUNDAS: Can you just go back a bit and explain more about how you worked with men who were seeking custody, when they were then in crisis accommodation at the same time?

Mr Williams: Well, we worked with them all the time, and we were always trying to help get them housing in Canberra, so they can have somewhere to have contact because, unless they can have a suitable accommodation arrangement, it doesn't only affect their housing; it affects their Centrelink payments, it affects everything. That's the thing we're working on all the time. But just getting away from the service we had then and now: even this morning I was working with a man to try to get him accommodation because his two children are split up. The daughter's living with the grandparents, who are old and they can't have her any more. He's living in a flat with a mate and his son and he's been told he's only got two more days and he's got to get out. What he's trying to ask the government is to give him a house so he can have his two children together, because the daughter's ready to start high school, and the wife doesn't want them. That's the sort of thing we're working with all the time.

THE CHAIR: We get that sort of representation through my office quite regularly.

Mr Williams: Yes. That is the problem. We worked out this morning that it's virtually been a government housing problem, because he had a contract with Housing but, because of a few things, they've broken the contract. These people say, "I can't go into that." They think the government is wrong and they're going to tell the government, the independent tribunal, stuff like that. So, yes, we're working with those people all the time. It's an everyday occurrence. I'm not in any way exaggerating; I just can't sort of get out how bad the accommodation crisis is for people is in Canberra.

I can remember years ago when I used to work with the Salvos and take soup under the bridge going out to Yass, and the people were lying on old mattresses and bags and things like that. I don't do it now and I don't know whether it happens now, but the need for accommodation is very great.

THE CHAIR: Yes, I think the government's affordable housing task force is going to be the vehicle for all of those issues to be exposed for the government to actually get a much better handle on it. Really, it comes down to, firstly, whether accommodation is affordable at all, for anybody, but also it's part of that vicious circle that you mentioned before: if you haven't got a house you can't get your Centrelink payment; if you haven't got your Centrelink payment you can't have your house; you can't have your house, you can't have your kids; you can't have a house because you haven't got your kids. Around and around you go and there don't seem to be any processes which can cut those circles.

Mr Williams: In all honesty, when we had the service, too, we had to make a distinction between Canberra residents and people coming from interstate. People often just land in from interstate in the middle of the night and ring up and demand that they should have somewhere to stay. Well, when we were quite full, and we knew we had people with children waiting on our books, we had to tell these people, "We've got to actually accommodate the ACT people first." I think that's something the government should look at. I don't know how you would do it, but you have to discourage people from landing here off the trains at 12 o'clock at night and expecting someone to accommodate them, when they've got no money or stuff like that. That's a major factor, too. I think that's why Samaritan House are full a lot of the time, because people just turn up out of the blue.

MS DUNDAS: I have one question that Mrs Cross, who couldn't be here because she's sick, asked me to ask you. It is about how you saw the service, when you ran it, fitting in with the neighbourhood of where you were. Were there any problems being in a suburban setting or did you have—

Mr Williams: Well, when we first started there, we had a bit of a problem when they found out that the government had given us a house in their street, but they were only upset because they thought the government should have went around and told them first. So I called all the neighbours in. One person was spokesman. I got them downstairs in the TV room and we had coffee and cakes and stuff and I told them, "Look, I'll give you my guarantee: we're not going to be a threat to you; there's going to be no alcohol; there are going to be no drugs; it's taboo in this place." We got to know the neighbours really well.

We did have one incident where there was a lady across the road and she was packing the boot of her car or something. This Aboriginal bloke, unknown to us, went across and asked her for some money. Her son came and told us. But he was always there and he always said, "Look, I'm right behind you and if you need a hand here anytime or anything, I'll be able to help you." We never had any problems from the neighbours.

We had a few complaints about people parking in the street, but we also had a rule that, because the Kaleen shops were at the back of us, they could park around there. We put a gate in the back yard so they could come through. A lot of the neighbours thought that they were our people parking out there. But most times they weren't people at our place

parking there; they were people in different houses and that. There are a lot of young people up there that run up and down the street and that. Even when we had our meetings there, we had a sign up and a partition rope or “No parking, you have to park around at the shops” and stuff like that. So no, we never had any real great problems with the neighbours—not that we know of, anyway.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time and for your submission. We appreciate it very much .

Mr Williams : I should tell you that I’m in the process of writing to your government now to ask them would they consider a further service, almost immediately under our care, to try to set up what we were running, because we have been told by people who have been in this new service that it’s not the service that it was set up for; it’s a completely different thing.

THE CHAIR: Well, we wish you luck with that—because you’re going to need it. Thanks very much for that.

MS DUNDAS: Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 4.54 pm.