



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON JUSTICE
AND COMMUNITY SAFETY**

(Reference: [Inquiry into ACT Budget 2021-22](#))

Members:

MR J HANSON (Chair)
DR M PATERSON (Deputy Chair)
MS J CLAY

PROOF TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

FRIDAY, 15 OCTOBER 2021

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Secretary to the committee:
Ms B McGill (Ph: 620 70524)

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

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

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Amended 20 May 2013

The committee met at 9.00 am.

BOLTON, MS GENEVIEVE, Executive Director/Principal Solicitor, Canberra Community Law

THE CHAIR: Thanks, and good morning. Welcome to the first of six public hearings of the Standing Committee on Justice and Community Safety inquiring into the ACT budget 2021-22. We are being recorded, broadcast and webstreamed live.

The first session is with Canberra Community Law. I welcome Genevieve Bolton. This is not your first appearance before the committee; you have been pretty busy. I remind you of the protections and obligations afforded by parliamentary privilege and draw your attention to the privilege statement. Can I confirm that you have read that and understand it?

Ms Bolton: Yes, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Great. We are not taking opening statements because we have only 20 minutes and I am mindful of the time. With regard to the budget, have you got enough money to do what you need to do? Is there a shortfall, and what is the impact of that, if there is?

Ms Bolton: Thank you, Chair, and good morning, committee members. We welcome the significant investment the ACT government has made in relation to the provision of free legal assistance services in the ACT in respect of community legal centres and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal services. That investment of \$2.018 million in terms of the investment in Canberra Community Law translates to \$340,000 this financial year, which is the equivalent of an additional three full-time solicitor positions. I also acknowledge that there is an additional \$85,000 for the next two financial years for the community legal centre hub, in recognition of the fact that the costs of running the hub have increased over at least the last five years.

The investment for Canberra Community Law—that \$340,000—in effect is replacement funding. In the previous financial year, in recognition of the significant increase in legal need in the ACT, Canberra Community Law received the equivalent of \$365,000 in funding grants to employ staff. Some 41 per cent of that was from the commonwealth government and about 59 per cent was from the ACT government.

Whilst that is welcome, there are a couple of points I would like to make in relation to the funding. Firstly, it is for 12 months only. The line in the budget papers indicates that that is to recognise ongoing need. There are a couple of things to say. The centre has been chronically underfunded for a very long time. That is reflected in the fact that, for a long time, in order to keep up with demand, staff have worked long hours during the week and often work over the weekend as well. The level of assistance that can be provided is reflective of the staffing levels, so we need to make some very tough decisions around the level of assistance we can provide to people. For example, in the area of public housing we get lots of requests for assistance in relation to maintenance and repair issues and we have very limited capacity to provide representation before the tribunal, which is often what is required in order to

effectively resolve those issues.

Since the pandemic began, we continue to see a consistent and significant increase in legal need and clients contacting the centre. I have run reports to compare January to June 2020 with January to June 2021. I rang a colleague to double-check the calculations because they show that the demand has skyrocketed. For instance, there has been a 47 per cent increase in the total number of clients who have contacted the centre during that time. Legal advisers have increased by just under 70 per cent and the number of duty lawyer services has more than doubled. In 2020 we provided 23 duty lawyer services and in the same period in 2021 we provided 66.

Our concern is that, based on current trends and patterns, the need will only continue; it is not limited to a 12-month period. We are deeply concerned about what the impact will be on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged members of the community if there is not additional funding provided by the ACT government come the end of 30 June 2022.

MS CLAY: For your ongoing ordinary services, do you need to put in a budget bid each year?

Ms Bolton: We receive core funding; we receive funding under the National Legal Assistance Partnership. That is four-year funding. We also receive some core funding from the ACT government which is usually on three-year agreements. But in terms of the replacement COVID-19 funding, we will need to put in another budget submission.

MS CLAY: For the replacement COVID funding for next year you would probably be expecting to put in a budget bid, and if that is part of a trend rather than a temporary bid, the way it is structured at the moment, you would need to put in a budget bid each year; is that right?

Ms Bolton: It would depend on the commitment the government makes. If the government recognised that this is likely to be an ongoing continuing need and provided funding for three years, that would obviously take us through that period. But if the government decides to provide an extension of only another 12 months, we would then need to put in another budget submission.

MS CLAY: If you put in 12-monthly budget submissions, what is the impact on your day-to-day operations and your ability to find and retain staff? Does it make much of a difference?

Ms Bolton: It certainly does. In the last financial year we lost two staff members, one of whom was on contract. The other staff member decided to resign in recognition of the serious financial position the centre was facing. It is very difficult to keep staff who are on short-term contracts when the centre cannot guarantee them a job post the end of the contract, particularly in a pandemic where people are very conscious of the impacts of the economic downturn and do not want to be in a position where they might be facing unemployment. They tend to jump early to avoid that potential outcome.

MS CLAY: Do you feel it has an impact on the quality of the service you are able to

provide if you have a lot of staff changeover?

Ms Bolton: If you have staff turnover you need to direct resources into inducting new staff members and training them. The additional challenge we face as a centre is that we are so specialist in the provision of the legal services we provide. The largest area of our practice is in relation to homelessness law and public housing law. We also have a disability discrimination law practice and a social security law practice. These are not subjects taught at university. Often the people we employ will not have had the experience of practising in these areas, so they are on a steep learning curve to get on top of new areas of law very quickly in circumstances where we are also facing large workload/case load issues. It does take time for people to get up to speed.

DR PATERSON: On this 47 per cent increase in people requesting your services, are there any specific issues or services that have increased? Why do you think there is such an increase?

Ms Bolton: It is a range of different factors. There is a severe shortage of public housing in the ACT, so we have seen a significant increase in the number of people contacting us who are desperate to either get on the most urgent public housing list or get allocated a property. We have also seen in the maintenance repair area a significant increase in people contacting us who need legal assistance to try and get often some really urgent structural repair issues sorted.

As we would all be aware, there was an eviction moratorium in effect last year. What we have seen is that this year there has been a significant increase in matters going to the ACT Civil and Administrative Tribunal and the Commissioner for Social Housing, as well as community housing providers seeking evictions.

A really practical example of that is that, prior to the pandemic, the tribunal had one residential tenancy list on a Thursday that dealt with both private and public housing matters. That tribunal now runs two full-day lists, one on a Wednesday for private tenancies and one on a Thursday for public housing tenancy matters.

Prior to the pandemic we were providing half a day of duty lawyer services, whereas now we are providing a full day. We have only been able to manage that demand to date because we have been very fortunate that a major private law firm in the ACT has given us a secondee full-time solicitor to assist us to manage that workload.

We are also seeing an increase in social security legal advice and assistance. Again, I think some of that is reflective of the support measures that were in place. For example, Centrelink suspended debt recovery activities last year, whereas all of that has now recommenced. We have continued to see this year a very steady flow of clients contacting us seeking assistance either to try and get onto Centrelink payments or because they have had Centrelink debts raised against them.

DR PATERSON: Is the legal centre hub a drop-in centre?

Ms Bolton: We have three community legal centres which are co-located—the Women’s Legal Centre, Canberra Community Law and the Environmental Defenders Office. So the hub refers to the co-location.

MR CAIN: When were you notified of the funding for this year?

Ms Bolton: Prior to the end of June we received advice that there would be funding in this budget for us.

MR CAIN: Were you advised of how much it was at that time or did you have to wait?

Ms Bolton: No, we were advised of the allocation.

MR CAIN: What is a better time for you to be advised of the next year's funding so that you can make the obvious plans?

Ms Bolton: As soon as possible. We appreciated being given the heads up; we deeply appreciated that. But, even so, we were advised in June and we had people on contracts until 30 June and they were waiting to know what would happen beyond 30 June. Ideally, it would be much sooner than that.

MR CAIN: Have you put a request through to government for more timely advice for the next period of funding?

Ms Bolton: No. We are about to start to do that work.

MR CAIN: I hope you are advised a bit sooner next time.

Ms Bolton: Thank you.

THE CHAIR: Ms Bolton, thank you very much for attending today's hearing. I also thank you very much for the amazing work you are doing in our community. We all very much appreciate it, and we wish you all the very best in the year ahead. Hopefully things get a little bit easier as we get out of COVID.

Ms Bolton: Thank you, Chair.

ROSENMAN, MS ELENA, Chief Executive Officer, Women's Legal Centre
MACLEAN, MS CLAUDIA, Principal Solicitor, Women's Legal Centre

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the committee hearing. This hearing is being recorded and we are being webstreamed at the moment. Can I confirm that you have read the privilege statement?

Ms Rosenman: Yes.

Ms Maclean: Yes.

THE CHAIR: Fantastic. We are not taking opening statements, so I will kick off. Is your funding allocation in this budget going to give you enough money to do what you need to do?

Ms Rosenman: Thanks for having us here. It is probably important to understand what was in the budget for community legal centres and specifically for the Women's Legal Centre. There are some real differences between funding allocated from the JACS portfolio and other portfolios that it is important for the committee to understand.

The budget included some measures to support community legal centres, and those investments were primarily focused on essentially filling the gap that was created by the Australian government's decision not to extend COVID relief funds to community legal centres and Legal Aid in Australia. The Women's Legal Centre was not a recipient of those funds from JACS because there was also in the commonwealth budget the announcement of additional funds to come specifically to women's legal centres as gender specific legal assistance providers.

There are some funds coming from JACS to the community legal centres more broadly that the centre will benefit from. As my colleague Genevieve Bolton might have mentioned, there was a very modest increase in the funding allocated to support our occupancy, as well as some funding designed to ameliorate what we expect to be a very significant drop in funding available to us from the Law Society in coming years as a result of the indexation rates.

The most significant initiative in the ACT budget for the Women's Legal Centre was the announcement of ongoing funding for the very successful Health Justice Partnership program. That program commenced in 2019 as a pilot, through the family safety office, and has been funded on a rolling basis of short-term funding from 2019 to date. The announcement of ongoing funding for that was long overdue and very welcomed from the centre. Legal Aid are the other providers of that program. I note for the committee that that funding is allocated through the Community Services Directorate, not through JACS; so it is not JACS funding.

The centre has received additional commonwealth funding. My colleague Gen Bolton spoke about the deplorable and chronic underfunding of the community legal centre over many, many, many years now. The centre finds itself in a slightly better position in terms of funding for core function at the moment, but overall I would say the centre

retains a really serious concern about the level of support from the ACT government for really essential community-based legal services.

DR PATERSON: We heard from Ms Bolton about the increase in cases of about 47 per cent over 2020-21. Have you experienced the same thing? Are there any trends in the issues coming up, and do you see this being a long-term thing?

Ms Maclean: Due to the nature of our work, 80 per cent is family law related, so we have not seen that immediate increase. There was a spike in our employment practice, of course, when people were worried about the stability of their jobs, and we know women are more likely to be in casual and unstable employment. However, what we anticipate is the repeat pattern of what we saw last lockdown, which is the tsunami effect after businesses start opening up, debt collections start coming through and the financial stress.

At the moment we are finding that clients are in survival mode; they do not want to create any more change in their life if they do not have to because it has been so disruptive. But what we saw last time—and we anticipate that this will happen again—is a stark increase in assistance around family violence orders, family violence advice. Last time we had a 162 per cent increase in advice related to family violence orders. We had a 97 per cent increase in general advice about family violence. We had a 60 per cent increase in relation to child residency and how do I obtain safe care arrangements for my children. So people are not quite in action mode yet, but we are preparing for the calm before the storm.

In general trends, though, over the last financial year we have seen an increase particularly in our sexual harassment and sexual assault space. We put that down possibly to what we call the Brittany Higgins effect and that issue being much more in the limelight, which is really, really positive. We also anticipate bolstering unemployment and discrimination practice for that reason and engaging in that space in a much deeper way.

MS CLAY: I am interested in the spike in sexual harassment and sexual assault claims. I very much understand the Brittany Higgins effect, but we have been in lockdown, and I would have expected that people would not have felt able to take that forward. Has that spiked even during lockdown?

Ms Maclean: No, that is over the last financial year. But we have actually had a few during lockdown. They might be having that time out of the workplace as well to contemplate some poor behaviours that have happened to them. So lockdown has been a funny thing; in some ways it has definitely closed the window on people assisting assistance, and in other ways it has actually given people the breathing space to seek that assistance, just depending on those clients' circumstances.

MS CLAY: Ms Rosenman, thank you for outlining the funding landscape you are operating in. We were in a similar situation last time before estimates where everyone was worried about the statutory interest account not coming through, and that is probably likely to happen for some years out, I would imagine. There is a lot of uncertainty about commonwealth funding. You have funding sources from the legal and the community services side and you have ACT government funding sources, so

it is quite a difficult environment you are working in. How many sources of funding do you have that are one-year funding only? What is the impact of those 12-month funding sources on your workload and your ability to fund staff?

Ms Rosenman: At the moment, for possibly the first time in the entire time I have been here, we are in the unusual position of having no 12-month funding agreements, which is a fantastic situation. The problem we do have is that—you are right—the administration cost of running so many different funding agreements, including multiple funding agreements within the same parts of JACS, is extraordinary and certainly removes resources that would otherwise be available for what I think we could all agree would be better spent on direct service delivery and service improvements. So that is an issue.

Overall, over the last few years, I would say that the funding arrangements for the centre have absolutely been characterised by short-term and pilot funding. The Health Justice Partnership is an example. Before this budget we have had a six-month funding agreement, I think we had one 12-month funding agreement, a nine-month funding agreement and a three-month funding agreement. I think you can imagine the disruption on services and the really corrosive effect on what is intended to be a partnership when our partners are constantly saying, “Do you have any more information? Will this service still be available to our clients in three months, six months, 12 months?” It is really significant.

I would also say that it will take us a long time to catch up from the history where that has been the nature of our funding agreements—short term and insecure. The only reason that we are not in that position is because of investment from the commonwealth in our core functions, rather than investment from the ACT. I absolutely think there is a space for the ACT government to step in where there has been dereliction from the commonwealth government and to try and provide these services with some more stable funding over the next few years.

I think my colleagues at Canberra Community Law and at the Consumer Law Centre are particularly affected by short-term funding. But, as I say, overall, over the last decade, the problems that we have had with funding are that base funding is inadequate to cover just the core functions. The indexation rates of funding really mean that most legal services—all the ones I know—are really facing an effective funding cut every year. A really good example of that is the gap between the increases to our core funding versus the increases to salaries mandated by the equal remuneration order. At the centre, salaries increased between 35 per cent and 45 per cent at some levels, which was long overdue at the point they decided that community services staff should be paid at least as well as we pay welders. But the increase to our core funding to cover those costs in the same period was less than 15 per cent.

You can automatically see that one of the biggest issues we have is the inadequate levels of base funding and of indexation to actually cover increased costs of services. That absolutely, without any doubt, affects the quality and quantity of services that we are able to provide. By way of example, we run an advice and intake line at the centre. That line is open 9 till 5 Monday to Friday. It is the only line in Canberra that women can ring and speak directly to a lawyer about their problems. We have landed on a base staffing rate that allows us to capture, on average, between 75 and 80 per cent of

those calls as they come in. I think we can all agree that we would like that call to be answered for 100 per cent of the women calling for assistance, but 75 and 80 per cent is what we have been able to capture on our existing staffing levels.

At times where we have not been able to staff that function properly because of, particularly, funding and security, the number of calls we have been able to answer has dropped to 58 per cent. So that means one in two women who are calling—most in distress and in some of the most stressful periods of their lives—are not having their calls answered. I think we can all agree that that is a really unacceptable situation.

MS CLAY: What would be a better way to index the increase in those core functions? Is there some reference point you think would be better?

Ms Rosenman: One of the issues for community legal centre funding when we look at the other community sector funding is the difference in where the funding is administered from. The community legal sector is administered by the Justice and Community Safety Directorate and we have really strong and positive working relationships with the staff in that directorate.

However, you probably also know that the majority of community services are funded by the Community Services Directorate. What often happens as a result of our location is that legal assistance services are not subject to the same sort of development, discussion and program management as happens with every other sort of type of community service. Legal services are not subject to the same indexation rates as other community services. We are not part of conversations around, for example, the ACT government's move to try to commission services; we are still funded on a widget basis.

There are obviously some strengths in where we are located. Certainly, with the current Attorney-General the Women's Legal Centre has seen a noticeable difference in our access to the Attorney-General, in his understanding of our issues and commitment to addressing those. But the way that funding is administered means that community legal services as compared to other community services are falling behind, and that gets progressively worse and worse every year.

THE CHAIR: Are you able to quantify that shortfall? You said there is a funding shortfall. If you were, in an ideal world, able to get a certain amount of money to achieve 100 per cent phone calls and do all your other services, what is the amount we are talking about on a per annum basis?

Ms Rosenman: Last year we estimated that that was probably around between half a million to \$750,000. The Women's Legal Centre—and this is very specific to the Women's Legal Centre; I need to be really clear that it does not extend to other community legal centres—was in a position where we were able to meet that because of additional commonwealth funding that came through the budget.

There were a lot of issues with the process around that commonwealth funding and we were only notified that we were receiving the commonwealth funding, despite the absolute black-and-white nature of the announcement from the Australian government, as recently as a few weeks ago. We are in what I think our colleagues in the rest of the

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sector would find an unenviable position. But to suggest that that allows us to meet need is not correct; what that allows us to do, though, is maintain existing service levels.

My primary concern when it comes to community legal centre funding—our centre’s funding included—is that at the moment, because the base levels are so inadequate the people we primarily reach are people who know we exist or people who are in touch with another organisation who know we exist. To suggest that we are meeting need is absolutely inaccurate. My concern is not for the women who are getting through to our advice and intake line and the women who are being referred to us or our Health Justice Partnerships and other community services; it is the women that do not even know that we exist and that legal assistance is really critical to them—particularly for women experiencing domestic and family violence—planning and thinking about separation.

We know that one of the most effective tools the perpetrators of violence have are the key messages that if you leave this relationship you will get nothing and you will never see the children again. Legal advice is absolutely critical to countering that messaging which keeps so many women trapped where they are.

MR CAIN: Thank you, Elena and Claudia, for the really important work you are doing. I am assuming you have made submissions to the ACT government about a more long-term and need-meeting funding. How are those discussions going?

Ms Rosenman: We are still trying to finalise funding agreements for the current financial year. We still have, I think, at least three outstanding funding agreements and we are obviously just about to end the first quarter of the financial year. I have to admit that, at the moment, securing money we have been promised is our focus.

MR CAIN: All the best with that. Obviously the Law Society has a role as well, so I know you have got discussions going with them.

THE CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Rosenman and Ms Maclean, for appearing today, and thank you also for the very important work you are doing. We appreciate your passion; it is good to see. It is a difficult environment in which you are working, made worse by the effects of COVID. Hopefully, as we come out of that you can find a pathway forward.

CARUANA, MR ALEX, President, Australian Federal Police Association
ROBERTS, MR TROY, Manager, Media and Government Relations, Australian
Federal Police Association

THE CHAIR: Our final session today is with the Australian Federal Police Association. We are being recorded for Hansard and we are being webstreamed. Can I confirm that you have both read the privilege statement?

Mr Caruana: Yes, we have.

THE CHAIR: Great. We are not having any opening statements, in the interests of time, but obviously this has been a busy time for police. You are already underfunded, in your view, by about 150 police officers across the ACT. Can you explain to me what pressures this is putting on your members, then exacerbated by COVID?

Mr Caruana: First of all, I thank the committee and the chair for inviting us along today. This is the first time the AFPA has been invited to such a committee, so we are very grateful for the opportunity to speak to it.

To answer your question, Chair, we had the bushfires, as you can remember, and straight after the bushfires we rolled into this pandemic. The bushfires had stretched our members both mentally and physically, then we rolled straight into the pandemic. Notwithstanding that there were some close contacts and some members had to be quarantined because of that, it sidelined a lot of our members. The bushfires flowing onto the pandemic and then flowing on to members being sidelined because of contamination or close contamination, it is stretching the police force very, very thin across the ACT.

We have some of the fastest growing jurisdictions anywhere in Australia—and I will use Gungahlin as an example of that—yet we have the lowest police densities to any police jurisdiction in Australia. As an example, members are telling us that because of the pandemic and because members have been put aside to do the doorknocks and the COVID compliance, which we support, other teams that are fighting certain crime types have been stood down. So your targeting teams, for instance, your commercial crime and your crime ops or your organised crime et cetera, they have been stood down in order to prop up what is now called the business-as-usual teams to do the doorknocking and compliance checking et cetera.

We do not have the bodies or the depth to be able to support an ongoing crime team or an investigation team and the pandemic or anything else that may flow out of it—whether it is another bushfire, because we are coming into that season et cetera, et cetera. We are quite thin, and members are suffering mentally and physically because of it.

THE CHAIR: The matters that are not being followed up or investigated, can you give me a sense of what offences are not being investigated and what sort of quantum?

Mr Caruana: I have not got an exact quantum, Chair, but it would include things like

organised crime, commercial crime and fraud. They are the investigation-type crimes which need a larger amount of time to go ahead. I have even been told of some cross-jurisdictional jobs where a resolution was planned. However, due to 60-odd people being moved out of the crime teams into frontline policing or into the COVID compliance teams, a resolution with NSW Police did not occur because they did not have the police numbers to do it.

DR PATERSON: There has been some criticism recently in the Assembly about over-policing during COVID. What are your observations of ACT Policing during COVID, and particularly in respect to community engagement?

Mr Caruana: I was disappointed to hear some of that commentary during question time. Police were doing their job and they were enforcing the health directives in very trying and testing conditions. In relation to that, people going to the watch house is often the very last resort and there are strict conditions when someone is taken to the watch house as to what and how that is to occur. And, even then, when they are at the watch house, bail may still be granted.

I think, and all of my team thinks, that ACT Policing have been doing a great job through the whole period. They have been the front line of keeping the community safe during the whole time, with very, very few complaints. We know that overtime and work-life balance have been stretched and members are still going out and are being professional and doing their job every day. I think it is often forgotten that they are human beings as well and that they are doing the best they can in these situations.

DR PATERSON: Can you speak to the mental health support that your members have access to and whether that is sufficient?

Mr Caruana: The AFP is trying very hard to put up or stand up what they are calling the blue shield, and that has been federally funded. We feel as though the federal government can implement some other changes to help our members. That would include what we are calling the blue card, which is very similar to the Defence white card, so should a member fall on tough times they are able to access help. We would also like to see the introduction of presumptive legislation, similar to what has been done with the fire brigade and some other jurisdictions, where members put their hand up that they have a mental health injury and that is accepted straightaway and then, following treatment et cetera, Comcare, the government insurer, can do an assessment as to what level of insurance that should be.

That being said, if we had more police officers on the ground, we would be sharing the load. Many hands make a light load, and at the moment we do not have the bodies to prop up a sound police force for Canberra. We are well below the national average in police numbers. We have some of the fastest growing jurisdictions in Australia and yet we still have very, very low numbers, and it does not appear to be that they are growing at the same rate as the community.

DR PATERSON: But the crime rate has not gone up; it has either remained constant or gone down.

Mr Caruana: Some crime rates have gone down or remained constant, but others

have gone up during the pandemic. If we look at car theft, for instance, save from Queensland, Canberra has have one of the highest car theft rates in Australia. I think it is the second highest in Australia. We also have high domestic violence rates; obviously during the pandemic these were exacerbated.

Whilst crime rates are a statistic we can look at, what we need to look at is the calls for service. The numbers of calls for service or the calls for ACT Policing for attendance have increased significantly. Whilst there might not be a crime or there might not be an activity that constitutes a crime statistic, the number of times ACT Policing have been called out to do a job has increased significantly. So the calls to service for members have increased significantly.

DR PATERSON: Do you think more investment in Crime Stoppers would help? Do you think people are calling police when they should be contacting Crime Stoppers?

Mr Caruana: My understanding of the calls is that they are genuine calls. A lot of them are related to mental health, and an increasing of the PACER model will alleviate some of those calls. However, the other calls that go out there—whether it be domestic or family violence or drug related calls—are still valid calls but just do not tick over as a crime stat. I do not think investing in Crime Stoppers will alleviate that.

Mr Roberts: There are incidents that police attend which take up huge amounts of time. A missing person may take a whole squad of six to eight officers offline for a whole shift. No crime has been committed, but it is a huge draw on resources. Those type of jobs are increasing all the time. As the population increases, these type of jobs will increase and we are not seeing the correlation between population increase and police numbers. Police numbers have been static; we are not seeing the same movement for additional police on the ground.

DR PATERSON: There were additional 60-something police last year.

Mr Roberts: There was a budget announcement; I think it was \$33.6 or \$33.9 million, and that was for 69 staff. To this day, no-one can tell us what that break-up of that 69 will be. Is it 69 forensic experts? Is it 69 police officers? No-one will come out and put on the line to say what those numbers will make up.

Mr Caruana: Just to clarify, there are 69 bodies but we do not know if they are going out to frontline policing or if they are going to be doing back of house work. Our understanding is that some of that budget has already been spent to back of house. That is great because we understand we need some of that back of house. However, we are calling for more police officers going out there and fighting crime and keeping the community safe. They need the support of the back of house, but we definitely need the bodies on the front line.

DR PATERSON: I think the police commissioner answered that for us last time. But we will ask him again this time.

Mr Caruana: Thank you.

MS CLAY: We have already touched on the PACER model. How do you think that

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model is going? Do you think the community would benefit if we had an increase in PACER teams? Have you got any views on what that increase would look like?

Mr Caruana: Yes, definitely. On the ground, from the troops, they have been very positive about the PACER model. They have found true savings both in time and money with the rollout of the PACER model. However, they are hamstrung by its budget. If they had more people, more staff, more capability, they would be able to do more and save more time. So definitely positive from the troops in that sense.

Also, the community feedback has been very positive. Where we have offenders with mental health issues that are taking a lot of time, recidivist callers or offenders, those members are being taken care of appropriately, by appropriately trained mental health experts, to take them out of the cycle.

Traditionally a police officer would go to a job, take that person back to where they needed to be and then just get back to the station and an hour later be called back out to that same person, for the same issues et cetera, et cetera. But having that PACER model is really good and we have received really good feedback for it.

MS CLAY: So PACER has been reducing the rate of critical incidents as well, I understand. It has been safe for the staff as well, for the police?

Mr Caruana: That is right. It is safe for the staff and safe for the community. And my understanding is that it is cost neutral. By the time you weigh it all up, the costing is relatively neutral. For every dollar spent, it is almost a dollar saved in terms of the outcomes for that model.

In terms of how big it should be, I am not an expert in that field. My members are telling me that they would like to see it at least doubled or tripled in size in the first instance, then do an assessment and see how we go and then potentially grow it.

Obviously, that will then free up bodies of police officers to be on the front line. Once you grow that, that will also free up more police officers to be on the front line. Again, members are really keen to get out there and protect and to look after the community. But when they are tied up with these sorts of incidents that are better suited to go to another organisation or differently qualified personnel to deal with that, they get frustrated at attending over and over again. So opening it up, increasing it across all of Canberra, would definitely be a good start.

MS CLAY: Have there been any other ideas like PACER of different ways to do our policing so that it gets better results?

Mr Caruana: We are all about harm minimisation, and ACT Policing is also committed to harm minimisation, so we are open to all ideas. We have not got a silver bullet that is going to make it better or easier for anybody. However, what we can say is that with more people on the street you are protecting my members and you are protecting the police officers and you are creating a safer community for Canberrans. Unfortunately, I do not have the answer that you are after, but I certainly think that increasing the police numbers will go a long way to making a more effective police force in Canberra.

DR PATERSON: Are there other areas where collaboration between police and other services would be helpful, more efficient in resolving some of these issues or being able to serve the community better?

Mr Caruana: Obviously, closer collaboration with the health services, as well as, potentially, some cross-training so that the health services know that when police officers are doing this they need to be mindful of that and vice versa—when health services are telling you this, police officers need to be mindful of that.

With general emergency services, the ESA, we think the model is currently working, but it can be expanded upon. I will touch on the Gungahlin Joint Emergency Services Centre. That was a great concept. However, trying to cram all those services into an area with a growing population—we have now outgrown that. We are glad to hear that there is going to be some rethinking about where those services are going to go. However, the collaboration and those lines of communication and those lines of working together need to continue.

That is especially the case with bushfires. The police and the fire services will both tell you that from previous bushfires in 2003 or 2006 they learned a lot from the disconnect that there was. So bringing them together so that they can learn from each other and keep those lines of communication open has been a great thing. Obviously, you can always improve, so just improving on what we have already got will be a great way forward.

DR PATERSON: Given that COVID is with us for a while, are there any unique issues that have stemmed out of COVID for police members that would help in terms of dealing with health? Have particular challenges arisen?

Mr Caruana: When you are effecting an arrest it is difficult not to get hands on. It is very difficult to say to somebody, “Here, can you put these handcuffs on yourself,” so you have to get hands on. So there is that risk of transmission between the police officers and the community. We are going to need to think about safety of the public and safety of members. Decontaminating things—and I use the words “things” because it is a very broad range of equipment, whether it be handcuffs, cars, clothing et cetera—after every person is taking its time and is taking its toll on ACT policing.

Take, for instance, even between shifts, cleaning the cars. For instance, if I am on shift A and then I get in the car, I will clean it before I get in. Then at the end of my shift I will clean it. So that is taking up time at the beginning and the end of my shift. When Troy jumps into the car for the next shift, that is taking time out of his time as well while still having to do the usual day-to-day business. On top of that, decontaminating your handcuffs, your shoes, your clothes et cetera is taking a big chunk of time out. That is also affecting members’ effectiveness to be on the front line.

They do not complain about it. They tell me, “This is what the process is. This is what the protocol is.” But we can tell that it is grinding. It is slowly starting to have an effect on them mentally. Instead of having an hour to write my brief, I have 40 minutes or 30 minutes to write my brief. So it is taking its toll in that sense.

THE CHAIR: Can I confirm that the shortfall you are thinking across the board is in that 150 sort of region? Where is it being particularly felt geographically and functionally?

Mr Caruana: It is across the board. However, Gungahlin is definitely the fastest growing area in Canberra at the moment and Molonglo will soon be the close second. The issue we have at the moment is that Molonglo is covered by Belconnen—Troy can correct me if I am wrong in that statement—and can take resources from either Belconnen or Woden. Having its own station, similar to what we did when Gungahlin was first starting but not making the mistake of having too small a station to start with and having it where it is futureproofed, I think will be a smart move.

If we can have police officers across the board, the good thing about that is that police officers and shift sergeants will swap—they will rob from Peter to pay for Paul. If Troy calls in sick or Troy cannot come because he was COVID exposed, we can tap into other resources from other stations. That being said, there is no point building a station at Molonglo and then not resourcing it because then you are going to be drawing from already low numbers to backfill that station.

It is really important that if we do go with the police station at Molonglo—and we are very strong supporters of a police station at Molonglo—that you staff it appropriately. Same with Gungahlin—we need to staff that appropriately. Molonglo and Gungahlin would be the two areas to consider first, but definitely across the board just in frontline police officers. I think the back of the house will be taken care of once we have the correct numbers on the front line.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for attending today, and also thank you very much to your members. We appreciate, in normal times, what a very difficult job it is but, as you said, the fires and COVID have made it more complicated, more difficult. We are very proud of our police force.

Mr Caruana: Thank you, Chair.

THE CHAIR: That ends today's hearings, so we will adjourn as a committee until Monday, when we will be back for further hearings.

The committee adjourned at 10.01 am.