



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

Official Committee Hansard

**HOUSE OF  
REPRESENTATIVES**

STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT AND  
WORKPLACE RELATIONS

**Reference: Employment: increasing participation in paid work**

WEDNESDAY, 18 FEBRUARY 2004

CANBERRA

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**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**STANDING COMMITTEE ON EMPLOYMENT & WORKPLACE RELATIONS**

**Wednesday, 18 February 2004**

**Members:** Mr Barresi (*Chair*), Mr Dutton, Ms Hall, Mr Hartsuyker, Mr Lloyd, Mr Brendan O'Connor, Ms Panopoulos, Mr Randall, Ms Vamvakinou and Mr Wilkie

**Members in attendance:** Mr Barresi, Mr Dutton, Ms Hall, Mr Brendan O'Connor, Ms Panopoulos, Mr Vamvakinou and Mr Wilkie

**Terms of reference for the inquiry:**

To inquire into and report on:

Employment issues in both rural/regional and urban and outer suburban areas, with particular reference to:

- Measures that can be implemented to increase the level of participation in paid work in Australia; and
- How a balance of assistance, incentives and obligations can increase participation, for income support recipients

**WITNESSES**

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**WEGNER, Ms Evelyn , Volunteer Telephone Counsellor, Lifeline Australia ..... 11**



**Committee met at 11.18 a.m.****HARRIS, Miss Denita, Policy Manager and Industrial Relations Advocate, National Farmers Federation**

**CHAIR**—I declare open this public hearing of the inquiry into employment and increasing participation in paid work. I welcome Miss Denita Harris from the National Farmers Federation. Thank you for meeting with us today and thank you for your submission. For those of us who are insomniacs, it was just the right tonic: it is huge.

**Miss Harris**—I am sorry. I tried to condense that one. That is brief for me.

**CHAIR**—Proceedings here today are formal proceedings of the parliament. Although the committee does not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, you should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the parliament itself. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but if at any stage you wish to give evidence in private please ask to do so and we will consider your request. I invite you to make some preliminary comments about the issues you think are important to this inquiry before we move to questions and discussion.

**Miss Harris**—Thank you very much, Mr Chairman. Employment in agriculture was dramatically hit by drought, and approximately 80,000 jobs were lost over an 18-month period. The last ABS figures show that some improvement has occurred, but we have a fair way to go to reach the approximately 450,000 jobs in the industry that was continually growing prior to drought. Labour shortages were of significant concern prior to the drought. Although that concern has somewhat abated over the past 12 months, there is still a long-term perception in the industry that shortages will continue to occur, and we need to look at how we attract labour. Shortages have been the most acute in remote areas, particularly with regard to short-term seasonal work. Issues that have been raised with us particularly as a result of some of those concerns include the lack of transportation, lack of accommodation and lack of training.

The industry is working very hard towards trying to encourage more people into the industry, including with the establishment of the Job Outlook web site. We have provided a little pamphlet on that this morning. It was developed by Rural Skills Australia, which NFF established, and works in conjunction with the government to encourage skill initiatives and to encourage people to enter the sector. We have also been working with the federal government on the Harvest Trail information service, information on which is in the other brochure we have provided today. That was an initiative that came through the *Harvesting Australia* report, which recommended the establishment of a national information service on harvest jobs. That was established in July last year, and recently a booklet has been developed to encourage people to undertake the harvesting jobs.

NFF continue also to work with DEWR and the Job Network program to create better links between employers and the network to encourage greater participation, particularly in seasonal work. What we are trying to achieve is a coordinated approach of providing ongoing employment with various different employers to ensure that there is consistent employment for the individual employee, even if it is with different employers undertaking different tasks.

Individual commodity groups are also working on increasing participation in their industries. For example, Australian Wool Innovation, which is the R&D for the wool industry, is finalising a study on how the industry can encourage and develop more shearers and shedhands for the wool industry. NFF believe that many of the impediments to the take-up of paid work in regional Australia are to some degree related to the lack of services for regional Australia, which has been a highlight of the recent Regional Business Development Analysis Panel report that was put to the government last year. Those are our opening comments, and I am certainly open to any questions that the committee may have.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much. Your opening comment was that there was a jobs growth of 450,000 prior to the drought. In what sectors and regions was that growth taking place?

**Miss Harris**—It was predominantly across-the-board growth. We were experiencing about a two to three per cent employment growth across the country in agriculture prior to the drought. There have been some reductions in certain areas, such as broadacre facilities and to some degree harvesting, as mechanical utilisation has increased, particularly in the wine area. Nevertheless, growth has occurred. Most of our commodity areas do need to maintain labour to ensure the productivity gains that they need. While technology has improved somewhat, we are finding that since the technology changes of particularly the eighties and early nineties we still need to ensure that we maintain the labour. We are also having big growth in certain horticulture commodities, such as grapes, obviously, and stone fruit. Our exporting in horticulture is increasing substantially. For example, in Tasmania, where unemployment is quite high, quite a substantial number of stone fruit plantings have occurred in the last 12 months that have not yet come on line but will do in the next two years, so there will be a substantial increase in seasonal work in Tasmania due to the increase of stone fruit plantings in that state.

It is very hard to pinpoint particular sectors but certainly there was, prior to drought, an encouraging sign of a slow increase, and yet we were still experiencing shortages in certain sectors, particularly seasonal harvest work. The ‘grey nomads’, as we call them, have been filling some of those holes in the less labour intensive areas.

**CHAIR**—The other part of that question is: was the growth taking place in any specific types of jobs? Was it very much in farm labour or in the service areas in the rural towns that were servicing the community?

**Miss Harris**—It certainly was directly affecting farm labour. However, academic research shows that to a certain degree as soon as there is an increase in productivity and income going into a farm and an increase in labour so too there is a flow-on effect to the services of a small town. Many recent studies have looked at the impacts of drought and have shown that there is a direct relationship between the success of the farming community and the subsequent success of businesses located in small towns.

**CHAIR**—One of the other points that you make is that declining population in rural communities cannot be due to falling employment but must be due to such factors as declining private and public amenities and services. Is it a chicken and egg situation? Why are those public amenities and services declining? Is the population not there for them to be sustained?



**Miss Harris**—That is right. It is a very hard situation. Recent studies commissioned by the NFF show that there is substantial employment and population growth in large regional centres and coastal areas, but inland small towns are declining as jobs have not become available, particularly in the service industry, and as businesses centralise where they provide their services. However, we are finding that jobs are still around. For example, we have been looking in certain areas such as Hay in New South Wales where we are finding that while there has been a population decrease in that town there are still a substantial number of jobs available. Most of them are about 30 kilometres out of the centre of town and it is very hard to get people to be able to access transport to get to those jobs.

It is a difficult one to answer. There is no simple solution. Some of the opportunities that were raised were raised in the regional business action plan last year. They looked at how we can encourage more people into small areas, and they recommended a series of actions.

**CHAIR**—Thank you.

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—As I have a rural electorate, it is an issue that comes up for me time and time again. There seems to be a difference between the labour shortages in state seasonal work and the more career building demand for jobs. Some of my colleagues in other parts of the state have particular problems with the shortage of employees for seasonal work. What are some of the solutions or ways around this seasonal aspect?

**Miss Harris**—With seasonal work we are trying to encourage, particularly working with the Job Network and other employment agencies, being smart in finding someone seasonal work with a variety of employers so they can actually get nine or 10 months of work but it may be in doing different tasks. For example, we are hoping to work with a job provider in Hay to place people in about 10 months worth of work. That would include shedhand work, picking watermelons, helping with harvest for rice and grains, and picking fruit as well. So while that person may be with five or six employers over a period of time at least they have ongoing continuous employment that enables them to maintain regularity of work. But it does need a coordinated approach. It is quite difficult to coordinate five or six employers to ensure that they are all maximising that person at the right time for their particular commodity that they are producing.

It is an initiative that we are trying to look at in Hay with a particular Job Network provider who is keen to see whether it works. If that works, we will use it as a case study to broaden out. But it does need the assistance of a coordination role to ensure that that is developed because you cannot rely on one particular employer to coordinate it nor can you rely on the employee. We certainly recognise that people find seasonal work not a career choice. But in many instances, and historically, picking and harvesting work have been a career choice and there are people who travel around Australia with a lovely and enjoyable lifestyle. They enjoy doing it and get paid exceptionally well because they are very good at it and they are getting piecework rates. Their wages can be quite sustainable—they can work six or eight months of the year and then have four months off. You do have to choose the people who are willing to work that type of lifestyle, but nevertheless the work is there. If they utilise services such as these books that tell you where all the work is at different times of the year, they can sustain long-term seasonal work. They just have to be flexible in ensuring that they can get to virtually full-time work.

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—I think the committee would be interested, if I may be so bold as to speak for everyone, in the results of this particular pilot program in Hay because that sounds very exciting. I had the pleasure of launching the *ONtrack* document in Wodonga in my electorate. What sort of feedback have you had on it, particularly from farm businesses?

**Miss Harris**—From my understanding they have found it very good and it has encouraged a number of people, particularly in rural towns, to approach them and say: ‘I have seen this through the school’s career centre. I am keen to do an apprenticeship. What can we do?’ That certainly has been very beneficial. We are finding that there is more interest in working in the industry as the schools have been utilising this as a career technique. It has been certainly beneficial. We would like to see more utilisation of it and our commodity groups adding additional funding into this so that we can promote it further and add more information to it.

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—You say you would like to see more utilisation and extra information added to it. Could you just give us some more details and flesh that out a bit.

**Miss Harris**—As this has developed—and it is a fantastic tool—we have found ongoing questions arise as people get more and more involved in how they want to find information about working in the industry. We are hoping that we can add more interactive case studies onto it that give information about people who may have chosen an apprenticeship through this process and have subsequently found ongoing work. We want to say to them: ‘You utilised this in the first instance 12 months ago. What is your opinion now about working in the industry?’ We are finding that the interaction that enables this to work so well needs that ongoing follow-up so people are getting increasing information. Certainly our commodity groups and our R&D groups are very interested in supporting financially increasing its coverage and usage.

**Ms HALL**—The work force shortage is mainly casual.

**Miss Harris**—In some areas it is not, but it is predominantly casual.

**Ms HALL**—What type of work would be available that is not casual?

**Miss Harris**—Most of the non-casual work relates to farmhand work, particularly in places such as the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia where you do have large numbers of employees for mustering and station hand purposes. The number of farms is decreasing but the amount of land mass is being maintained. Therefore, farms are becoming bigger so they are needing a greater number of employees as farming families move off the farm. We are finding that part of the reason why employment was increasing prior to the drought was what we call corporatisation of the farming industry. We see, as this continues to occur in the next decade or so, that there will be increases in full-time employment. A winery I have been dealing with quite often lately on a particular case has some full-time employees—

**Ms HALL**—Could I interrupt for a moment? I am sorry—I have to go. You mentioned lack of skills, accommodation and transport. What kind of skills training is needed? Could you outline any solutions you have to the transport and accommodation issues?

**Miss Harris**—Do you want me to answer those?

**CHAIR**—Yes, go for it. I think we are all interested in those.

**Miss Harris**—Going back to the example of this winery: they used to not have any full-time employees at all but their business has grown and they now have four full-time employees and bring in about 50 casuals for the seasonal work. As businesses grow and as their export opportunities grow as well, they will increase full-time employment.

In terms of lack of skills: what we are finding in many instances is that, while there is a perception in the industry that you do not need to be skilled to undertake manual labour on farms, that is not the case. There are some serious occupational health and safety issues in working on farming properties, so the farmers are very keen for people to have undertaken basic occupational health and safety training. There is also the ChemCert certificate on chemical usage and the Forklift Ticket, and things such as pruning are of particular interest to the horticulture industry. There are the mostly short courses that are relatively reasonably priced, and they enable people to be better skilled as they hopefully apply for a job. They make them more productive from day one. Occupational health and safety is of particular importance to us, because there are otherwise serious induction issues that you need to consider. There is an inherent risk on property.

Accommodation is very difficult because we have found that it is very expensive to establish additional accommodation. Some centres have got it organised exceptionally well. For example, the Shepparton area has very large caravan parks that are utilised during the harvest period. We were doing a study down in southern Tasmania, south of Hobart, where there are a large number of farms with apples, pears and stone fruit. There is not one single caravan park, so people have to commute an hour each way. There is a discussion amongst the industry there about whether or not the industry themselves need to put some money towards establishing accommodation in that area.

Transport is also a big issue. Some of the initiatives that farmers have utilised in larger areas include putting together some money for a bus, and the bus picks everyone up from the town and then they are circulated around the properties. In some cases in larger centres, particularly in Queensland, the backpacker hostels have the buses and take the workers to the farms themselves as part of encouraging people to come to their particular hostel. So there are some solutions that the industry can be involved in, but we also need to work with state governments—particularly on the accommodation issues—on how we can resolve some of the problems.

**Mr WILKIE**—I used to be involved in the farming industry many years ago, so I have a bit of experience there. The submission acknowledges that pay is often a consideration in getting people out into the communities. Has a study been undertaken to determine how pay rates for farm employees rate compared to those for other people in similar types of work in the cities?

**Miss Harris**—We do not have that information, mainly because ABS does not include farming in some of its broader labour statistics. There have actually been some studies done by the Australian Workers Union recently which, for the shearing industry, for example, showed that about 80 per cent of shearers and shed hands are paid well above award rates. Certainly, from our experience in dealing with some of the larger corporations, they are paying quite significant amounts of money, because in many instances they are not only being provided with a pay rate but also board, food, utilisation of cars and so forth. That is for the full-timers.

In terms of harvesters' work and piece rates, most of the piece rates that I have seen are slightly above award rates. In many instances, people are earning quite significant amounts of money because they are good at what they do and can pick large numbers in a short space of time. But no, we have not done a comparison per se of rural industry versus other industries of like work.

**Mr WILKIE**—Do you think there should be incentives, such as taxation incentives, to try to encourage people to take up work in rural communities?

**Miss Harris**—Certainly it is the NFF position. We have a submission before government that we should be revamping the tax zone system to extend it to employees and businesses to ensure that people are encouraged to stay in regional areas. That is a submission that I have not included within this document but certainly, if the committee is interested, we could forward a copy to you in respect of encouraging people to remain in rural areas through the tax system.

**Mr WILKIE**—That would be great. Page 5 of the submission refers to agricultural businesses being dominated by owner-operated family businesses. There has been a trend in recent years for the children of those families to go to the cities rather than stay on the properties. If this continues into the future, what are the implications for the trend for employment in rural Australia?

**Miss Harris**—We actually think it will increase simply because as farms are maintained by the older generation, and the sons and daughters are not working on a property, obviously they need employees. There is a flow-on consequence from there, particularly in full-time opportunities. There is also an issue that if the farmer decides to sell the property and is not being succeeded by a younger person, it is more likely to be bought up by a farm next door which, again, will increase the opportunities for employment. We actually think there is a benefit to increasing employment in terms of the changing nature of the farming sector.

**Mr WILKIE**—I am very keen on increasing the availability of on-the-job training in the farming sector, particularly given that on farms you might have 100 different varieties of tractors with different operating mechanisms, so people need to get experience on a whole range of different implements. Do you think there are enough programs in operation at the moment to provide on-the-job training?

**Miss Harris**—It is difficult to access training, particularly on-farm training, simply because in most instances they are in remote areas and it is very expensive to get a trainer out to the property. Usually training is conducted by the farmers themselves. Again, there is a need for the farmers to ensure that they themselves have the most appropriate training. We believe that there does need to be more training and more accessible training for the industry to ensure that we can maximise the opportunities for ensuring that everyone is aware of the mechanical instruments that they are utilising. Certainly, for example, NFF sits on an advisory committee on occ health and safety, which is a joint venture from a variety of commodity groups. One of the things we are looking at is a standard operating procedure manual for operators working with the key machines utilised on properties so that there is at least a document on-site in a contained form that provides information to the farmers and their employees.

**Mr WILKIE**—Are there any moves for people to have training on a variety of properties?

**Miss Harris**—There are not, that I am aware of, but I could be incorrect. There is a cross-sector training package available that enables people to go to a variety of properties and to be aware of a variety of commodities. That has not been implemented, as far as I am aware, to date on an extensive level. We would certainly like to see it implemented and, as a result, have that experience across various different properties. I guess that is an extension of the issues we were discussing earlier with regard to our pilot project in Hay.

**CHAIR**—You mentioned in your submission that there is a concern by farmers about the difficulties of adjusting from one industry to another. I would like you to elaborate on that. More importantly, in light of the fact that governments often provide rural adjustment packages, does that mean that that is money that is wasted?

**Miss Harris**—No, I do not think so.

**CHAIR**—Are those packages not working if farmers are having trouble moving from one industry to another?

**Miss Harris**—I do not think the packages are wasted. The results that I am aware of have shown that they have been extraordinarily beneficial in encouraging movement from the industry, but there is no doubt that farmers have to deal with a cultural shift that is difficult for them to proceed with. It is not just a financial but a social and cultural influence that farmers go through. Particularly if they have been in the industry for generations, it is a very big decision to make. We are certainly very supportive of the AAA programs that include that financial support but there are other issues that have more of a social basis.

**CHAIR**—Is that provided as part of the package or is it purely a financial package?

**Miss Harris**—It is purely a financial package, so there are therefore some other issues. There are rural financial counsellors available who assist in some of these areas, but they are more focused on finance as opposed to social issues. But there is actually a growing support network of rural counsellors who specialise in providing counselling support for farmers moving out of the industry or in succession planning amongst families.

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—I would like to return quickly to the comments you made on the seasonal workers. You indicated that many of them would enjoy the lifestyle and enjoy a decent income for the period that they were there. Do you have any evidence as to the length of time a person would spend in that sort of role in their working life? In other words, might someone work in that area for a period in their 20s and then move on? Does it change readily?

**Miss Harris**—There are four groups of people who work in seasonal harvest work. There is the long-termers who has been around probably since their 20s and is still doing it in their 60s. Then there are the school leavers who are doing it for a year or two between finishing school and going to university or doing ongoing training. Then there are the backpackers. Finally, we have a substantial increase in the grey nomads who are picking up work for cash as they go around the country.

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—What proportion is the first category?

**Miss Harris**—The first category, we understand, is around 20 per cent. The school leavers are decreasing. The backpackers and the grey nomads are increasing.

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—Once the season has ended the seasonal workers tend to leave. I was concerned that they would save money accumulated through their work and not spend it in the economy in which they have earned it. Is there a proportion that stay and spend or not?

**Miss Harris**—It depends on which state they are in. I know I keep on referring to Tasmania but I have been down there quite a bit to talk to growers. In Tasmania there is a likelihood that people stay in an area and do seasonal work throughout the year—doing various different tasks on various different properties—and that they have been doing it for quite a considerable amount of time. On the mainland you find that more people do the harvest trail.

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—They are not quite as remote from things in Tasmania.

**Miss Harris**—That is right. The harvest trail is more throughout Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland.

**Mr BRENDAN O'CONNOR**—You made references to some assertions that an increase in wages could lead to a drop in demand for labour and so on. That seems to me an obvious assertion to make. If we can get beyond the practical problems associated with this proposal, is it worth considering designating migrants to particular remote towns—not so much the regional cities where they are doing well but the very remote communities where they have really quite significant shortages in labour? If that could be done, and no-one is suggesting that it is easy, are there members of the NFF that are supportive of that proposition?

**Miss Harris**—They are certainly supportive of any encouragement to people, including migrants, to undertake this work—it is needed, otherwise the product is not picked. In many instances there are experiences of groups of migrants that have settled in regional Australia and have been undertaking that work, and very well. So we would certainly look at anything to encourage migrants to regional sectors and to undertake those jobs. However, it would obviously have to be for jobs in which they had the capacity to maintain a lifestyle in a long-term sense.

**CHAIR**—I will move from seasonal and farm labour to the other shortage, which is the shortage of skilled people in the service areas. How do we encourage those people to move into those locations because, as you say in your submission, incentives can create an artificial demand?

**Miss Harris**—That is right. In many instances the feedback we are getting is that the difficulty with encouraging skilled people is their perception—and it may be accurate—of lack of support and ability to be able to take a holiday, for example, for a couple of weeks. Who is going to be the accountant in that town for four weeks while they are on leave? There are issues such as: do we encourage short-term, skilled people to relieve these people, the small business operators in particular, to enable them to have a break? That includes doctors, accountants and lawyers—whatever the case may be. That seems to be a real issue that is raised consistently. They feel closed in to the town all the time and if they close up shop for four weeks (a) they are not providing that service to their clients and (b) they are subsequently going to lose business. A

key issue is: what support can we provide them in the short term to ensure they can have that break and maintain their business at the same time?

**CHAIR**—Why would that be any different to someone in a skilled professional position in a city? They close their shops, particularly when it is only a one- or two-man operation and there is no-one else there.

**Miss Harris**—I think there is a cultural issue. In many instances, they are the only ones in a vast area—300 or 400 kilometres. If they close up for even a week there is a significant social shift and social concern of the general community.

**CHAIR**—You provide a solution or alternative when you talk about time share and doing short periods of time on a time-share basis to encourage them. Can you elaborate on that? Is it similar to locum work for a doctor or a nurse?

**Miss Harris**—It is virtually locum work. We currently have a large number of people retiring at an early age, yet they still have huge skills. Can we mobilise that work force into providing that locum or time-share facility? I am sure there are substantial numbers of accountants, for example, that are retirees and would still like to do part-time work that might be interested in going to regional Australia and supporting those businesses for a period of time. It (a) gives them a little bit of extra income and (b) they see parts of Australia they would never otherwise see. Maybe we need to start working with organisations, such as CPA and so forth, for ways in which we can encourage this amongst the professions.

**CHAIR**—Has this thought been progressed any further? Have you discussed it with DEWR?

**Miss Harris**—We have not discussed it with DEWR. My father is on the executive of CPA and I have raised it with him in the last few weeks but that is about all. It is a good example of where we would like to see it across the board.

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—There are some initiatives in my electorate in rural Victoria where they are utilising the professional skills of doctors and GPs in particular—those who are semiretired, or would be—and coordinating them, so it is a positive move. It would be good to see it developed in other professional areas as well.

**Mr DUTTON**—I am interested in the New Apprenticeships scheme. In your submission you referred to some further flexibility that was needed within that scheme. Can you outline what it is that you were talking about and the changes that might be needed?

**Miss Harris**—Certainly. Part of it is some of the things we discussed earlier, such as the capacity of on-the-job training and access to trainers to enable that on-the-job training to occur. There are difficulties, particularly in remote areas, of actually going to training, getting the training that they need. It is interesting, however, that larger companies such as AA Co. have become registered trainers in their own right and are going on-site to their stations to do it, but obviously most farms do not have that opportunity. It is about on-site training by the registered training organisation. It is also about the capacity of multiskilling and looking at visiting a variety of different properties. It is really about ensuring that we have an uptake of that multi-

commodity training package. We think that is underutilised at the moment, so we are hoping that there will be a greater take-up and coordination of that multi-industry package.

**Mr DUTTON**—Does the ability exist at the moment, if it were commercially viable, for a company to circumnavigate rural areas so they can undertake that on-site training? I guess it could include a number of trades to be provided for, but it would be a restricted amount. Is that available or feasible under the current regime?

**Miss Harris**—I am not aware of its availability. It may well be, but I am not aware of it. It certainly is a very expensive proposition, so where it is available it becomes very expensive to the farmer to access that training. One of the proposals that Australian Wool Innovation has is to look at its initiatives for shearer and shedhand training and support, to provide mentoring and on-site training, and to have the industry pay for that. That is yet to be finalised, but that is one of the initiatives being contemplated. The industry certainly recognises that it needs greater on-the-job training. The issue now is how far the industry can fund itself and does it need extra government assistance.

**CHAIR**—Thank you very much, Denita, for your time, your submission and your evidence. Did you say you were going to send something to us?

**Miss Harris**—We will send you the NFF tax zone paper, which is an interrelationship of some of the issues that we have discussed this morning.

**CHAIR**—Thank you. If we have any more questions we will get back to you.



[12.00 p.m.]

**BLUNT, Ms Catherine, National Projects Manager, Lifeline Australia**

**ELDRIDGE, Mrs Patricia, Volunteer Telephone Counsellor and Supervisor on Call, Lifeline Australia**

**SMITH, Ms Dawn, Chief Executive Officer, Lifeline Australia**

**WEGNER, Ms Evelyn, Volunteer Telephone Counsellor, Lifeline Australia**

**CHAIR**—Welcome. Thank you for coming in and meeting with the committee today. The proceedings today are formal proceedings of the parliament. Although the committee does not require witnesses to give evidence under oath, you should understand that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and warrant the same respect as proceedings of the parliament itself. Giving false or misleading evidence is a serious matter and may be regarded as a contempt of parliament. The committee prefers that all evidence be given in public. However, if at any stage you should wish to give evidence in private please ask to do so and we will consider your request. I invite each of you to make some preliminary comments about the issues you think are important to this inquiry before the committee moves to questions and general discussion.

**Ms Smith**—I assume you have received all of our papers. We have some extra things we would like to highlight, and I have brought two telephone counsellors with us to reinforce the case that we have put before you. I am not sure how much many of you know about Lifeline—I know that Sophie came and opened a subcentre for us in Wangaratta, in country Victoria, not that long ago. For 40 years, Lifeline has been offering a telephone counselling service non-stop to the Australian community. During the last calendar year, Lifeline answered more than 470,000 calls Australia wide. We are located in more than 60 communities around Australia, and more than half of these are in rural and regional Australia. There are approximately 5,000 trained telephone counsellors available on roster at any one time, with between 40 and 80 available at any particular moment.

The model that we use to deliver our service is a community development model—that is, we train local individuals from all walks of life to be able to listen with empathy, appropriately refer and effectively counsel people who call. Lifeline has long recognised the enormous benefits that this model yields both to individuals and to communities. As the volunteers are trained, they experience personal development and individual growth which translates into effective service delivery for us but, more importantly, increases their own capacity to cope with their own living and their ability to support friends and family in communities. This is particularly important in rural areas where minimal services are available.

During 2002, with the support of the Office of the Status of Women, we conducted some research to determine how this training had impacted on women's ability to seek further training opportunities and gain paid employment as a result of the Lifeline training and counselling experience. Five centres were surveyed at that time and we had 193 respondents in total. The

study that was conducted revealed that 93 per cent of the respondents felt that Lifeline enhanced their general work skills; 32 per cent were prompted to consider involvement in paid work as a result of their Lifeline experience; 26 per cent, or just over a quarter, stated that Lifeline assisted them in securing employment; 62 per cent, or about two-thirds of the cohort, had been prompted to participate in further education; and, of this sample group, 12 per cent were students. To illustrate these findings I would like to introduce Evelyn Wegner, who is a volunteer telephone counsellor at Lifeline Canberra. Her story illustrates Lifeline's role in creating an employment pathway to paid work and further education for young people.

**Ms Wegner**—I will share with you a few experiences, what you need to become a telephone counsellor and what I am doing now. Over the last few years a lot of friends came to me with a lot of problems they had. They were seeking support and advice and I never knew what to say to them. This really frustrated me because I wanted to be there for them and help them through their problems. I remember wishing that there was a course that existed that would teach me what to say and especially what not to say in various situations. Then I went to college. I went through a stage when I needed lots of support myself. Luckily, there was someone there who was empathetic, who listened and did not judge me. They let me share my own problems with them. I found this unusual and great that someone listened and, for once, did not give me advice. I had never experienced talking with someone like that. I found out later that they had learnt these listening skills through being a telephone counsellor years earlier. At that stage I still did not know what sort of career path I wanted to pursue and this effectively changed my life and my career path.

I decided then and there that I wanted to work in a helping job. The first step I undertook was to become a telephone counsellor with Lifeline. Once I had finished year 12 at the end of last year, I decided to defer university and get a job. I applied for a youth worker position at U-Turn Youth Services in Belconnen. I was pleasantly surprised when I won the job because I did not have a diploma in youth work at that time. I had only just finished year 12. I got the job because I had learnt most of the skills necessary through my Lifeline training and I found that to be really good. My employer was really impressed with the breadth of knowledge I had acquired through the ongoing counsellor development programs which I had done with Lifeline. I also developed other skills that were integral to my work through these workshops that are run through Lifeline.

Becoming a Lifeline telephone counsellor helped me to become a much effective listener, more assertive, confident and sensitive to the needs of others when speaking with clients and staff. Most importantly, I became more aware of my own values and beliefs so that I did not push them on to others unknowingly. Currently, I am pursuing a diploma in youth work through CIT. I may be able to receive recognition of my prior learning through the certificate for telephone counselling, which I have almost completed through Lifeline, and my other training. Lifeline also equipped me with the skills to be confident and sensitive to others in my own age group, as well as to other age groups. Now I am a social community leader within my youth group.

**CHAIR**—Well done, Evelyn. That is a good story. Congratulations. That is great.

**Ms Wegner**—Thank you.

**CHAIR**—Dawn, do you want to continue on with your statement?

**Ms Smith**—I just want to introduce Patricia. Do you want to hear Patricia's story first?

**CHAIR**—Sure. Let us go through it all.

**Ms Smith**—Women in paid employment comprise 64 per cent of the study sample group. The study showed that the overwhelming majority of women in that field felt that their training and experience with Lifeline had assisted them in the advancement to more skilled positions. Over half the group, from a variety of different backgrounds and education levels, had been encouraged to pursue further studies. Patricia would like to tell you her story about how she was in that category.

**Mr WILKIE**—I have to go, but I want to acknowledge Lifeline's contribution. I often sleep out at night to raise funds for them in Western Australia. They do a wonderful job. All the best and I am sorry that I cannot stay for the rest of the presentation.

**Mrs Eldridge**—When I started to read this I thought it was a bit like the life of Patricia Eldridge. It is pretty simple, but I will start. Lifeline Canberra was advertising for volunteer telephone counsellors, which I applied for and was accepted. Along with other volunteers, we paid a fee of approximately \$250 to Lifeline. We attended and completed a 16-week intensive training course. During the training course I was also attending the Canberra Institute of Technology, working towards completing a diploma in community work. I began to realise how Lifeline training assisted me greatly in my learning at the CIT. Lifeline enabled me to put the practice and the theory together.

In 2002 I completed the diploma and began to work as a youth worker. During 2003 I was approached by Lifeline Canberra to co-facilitate a 16-week training program for new telephone volunteers. I found this experience very rewarding and beneficial on a personal and professional level. After completing my diploma I decided to further my education and applied to the University of Canberra to study a Bachelor of Community Education majoring in community development. Once again I was able to put the theory and the practice together.

After I completed the volunteer training at Lifeline, they approached me again to become a consultant for them. The role of the consultant is to be available for telephone counsellors whenever they need support. Also during 2003 I decided to have a career change from a youth worker to a community worker. I needed two work referees. I felt I was able to ask Amanda Tobler from Lifeline Canberra to be a referee for me, because my experience at Lifeline Canberra has been that they are very supportive. The position as a community worker involves training volunteers. Again, I was able to use the practical experience I received from Lifeline. I feel this gave me a lot of confidence to enter the work force. I received feedback from my employer—I had a very good referee; thank you, Amanda—and the association with Lifeline was considered a very good resource.

Over time, I have worked as a youth worker, community worker and volunteer. I have to say that it never ceases to amaze me how the model that Lifeline uses works—that is, working beside the person and listening to them. I often think that we underestimate how powerful listening to people is and it highlights to me that we all need to be listened to. I am aware that on the completion of my degree in 2005 I will be working with people in the community as a

community development worker. I feel the skills that I have used at Lifeline will help me and I will be able to listen to what the community wants. Thank you very much.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Patricia.

**Ms Smith**—In the sample group, seven per cent of the women were unemployed and looking for work. Only a very few of those had undertaken further studies during their time with Lifeline. However, 40 per cent said that they were prompted to participate in more education since they started with Lifeline, so they started thinking about training. These women repeatedly mentioned the benefits of an increase in confidence, skills and abilities as a result of the training. The other group studied were women undertaking home and family responsibilities and represented 13 per cent of the sample. Seventy per cent of this group have been prompted to undertake further education. Several have entered the work force since joining Lifeline and over 30 per cent were prompted to consider paid work. Through their involvement with Lifeline they are encouraged to think about the future and gain self-confidence and knowledge of the field of psychology. Almost half of these respondents said that Lifeline had helped them in advancing to more skilled positions and more than half said that the experience with Lifeline had assisted them in getting employment. Most were positive that Lifeline had enhanced their personal skills.

Our collective experience over 40 years has been that the Lifeline training and counselling experience is an important gateway to employment for many participants. Improved self-esteem, the supportive peer group, and increased skills and experience are all significant reasons that that is so. I hope these stories can demonstrate to you the powerful influence that Lifeline has in creating employment pathways for women.

**CHAIR**—Thank you, Dawn. Catherine, do you have a statement to make?

**Ms Blunt**—The recommendations that we have that would help us to do our work would be to obtain more support through the formal education and VET sector, which would enable us to provide resources to our centres to continue, expand and improve the work that they do in training. Some of the things that we would like to see that would help us include, for example, expanding the New Apprenticeships scheme to cover volunteer workers—that is, people who are not in paid employment at the time. That would help our volunteers cover their costs. As Evelyn and Patricia have mentioned, they had to pay for their own training. If they want to do the certificate IV certified training course, they have to pay an additional cost, and they pay that themselves. If we had some support under that scheme or were able to access that scheme they could have that paid for.

As well, we have many volunteers who work in our shops. The Lifeline centres are supported by the work that they do in second-hand clothing shops. We have lots of volunteers who work in those shops. They could access the retail apprenticeship courses under that same scheme. If that were the case that would be tremendously beneficial to our centres. It would provide income for the centre and formal training opportunities for those volunteers. We would like to be able to access the New Apprenticeships scheme for our volunteers.

We would also like to see the guidelines for the ANTA funding expanded so that we can access that money on a national basis. At the moment we can only access it via the states, and we have only received \$23,500 from ANTA to help support our vocational education and training.

That has been accessed via the ACT whereas, in fact, our work is throughout Australia. The way that ANTA is structured is that we can only access it in the state where we are. They are the things we would like to see happen as a result of the evidence we have given you.

**CHAIR**—Thank you for that, Catherine, and for your submission. The results of the survey work done by the consultants are excellent. It is very enlightening to hear that some of your training is leading to positive outcomes. You talk about ANTA being provided on a national basis. Is your training consistent across the nation in terms of the type of training and the standard you are training at or is it very much particular to the state and the regional where Lifeline happens to be?

**Ms Smith**—We are attempting to standardise it but I would not say we have arrived yet. We have just issued a national training framework and level of competencies and all the 42 centres are mapping their training courses to those competencies over time. We have 30 designated sites with RTO status at the moment so we are working towards that standardisation.

**CHAIR**—You are a registered training authority?

**Ms Smith**—Yes. We became one last year.

**CHAIR**—Fantastic.

**Ms Blunt**—Lifeline Australia is an RTO and all of our sites have undertaken to develop their standards.

**CHAIR**—You have taken the first step towards achieving what you want to achieve.

**Ms Smith**—Yes, we have taken that first step.

**Ms Blunt**—We have got accreditation for the certificate IV in telephone counselling. We have that VET certificate. That was introduced in March last year. We got status for offering that. Since then we have had 15 people complete it and we have about 160 people who are currently going through that.

**CHAIR**—We have heard from two other witnesses about the concept of volunteer training moving on to be accredited and recognised through perhaps recognition of prior learning or a more formal educational structure like you are seeking. There is obviously a move to make use of the large base of volunteers we have in this country. I cannot understand why you cannot access the retail traineeship now. You have retail shops; you are an RTO. Why don't you go for it?

**Ms Blunt**—Our shops are mainly run by volunteers. Our understanding is that paid staff can access the New Apprenticeships scheme but not volunteer staff. Our warehouse managers can access that if they do not have any formal training but our volunteers cannot. It has to be a paid employee.

**Ms VAMVAKINOU**—Some 25 years ago I was one of your telephone counsellors. It actually steered me away from becoming a social worker but—

**CHAIR**—It helped her become an MP.

**Ms VAMVAKINO**—look where I have ended up. I did it as a young undergraduate, and I did enjoy it. I am interested to learn that 15 per cent of your funding comes from government sources. Does any of that funding relate to training activities as outlined in the submission or does this funding relate to the community services provided by Lifeline? What proportion of Lifeline's budget goes to training activities? You seem to have an issue with funding for community services, but training seems to be a very significant and useful purpose for the organisation.

**Ms Smith**—Of that 15 per cent, at the local centre level most of that would go towards the community services type activities. Certainly none of the government funding that I know of is specifically given for the training activities. I have never heard of any.

**Ms VAMVAKINO**—Would you see an opportunity for government funding for training?

**Ms Smith**—Absolutely. It would be hugely beneficial. It is a very big part of what we do, and the money at the moment is raised largely from our own activities—op shops and things.

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—I would like to congratulate you on your work and the huge army of volunteers that you have. Having a rural electorate, I am fortunate to be blessed, as per the ABS statistics, with a higher rate of volunteerism than my city colleagues enjoy, and I benefit from the quality of life of a myriad number of volunteer organisations. An integral part of that culture and that ethos—and this came out with the bushfires last year—has been the question of payment or not for volunteers. The view of people in my electorate—and I share this view—is that that very essence of community service, that very essence of volunteerism, necessarily is unpaid. I have some problems with your proposal to extend the New Apprenticeships program to effectively create a de facto work force by having apprenticeships, because I think that is a serious concern. It raises the opportunity for other organisations to do it. I think it is great if Lifeline can expand its paid work force, but also there is a huge difference and an underlying ethos with volunteerism. So I have to say I have a particular concern with that and I would be reticent, Chair, to support any moves or any recommendations that change the status of volunteers into effective employers through the New Apprenticeships scheme if it is not a genuine apprenticeship scheme. In other words, because someone volunteers to do a particular good thing for their community that should not necessarily mean that they become an apprentice or get paid. I do not think that would be consistent with any particular policy. Also, I think the report conducted—

**CHAIR**—I will get you to respond in a moment, Ms Smith.

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—The report was conducted presumably with funding from the Office of the Status of Women, so I am happy that the Commonwealth was able to tip in there. In your opening statement you said 193, but in the opening chapter in relation to demographic characteristics it says 153, so was that just a misstatement?

**Ms Smith**—Yes, I am sorry.

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—I had a detailed look at the demographics of those interested in rural and regional Australia and I suppose I was disappointed that out of the 153 responses only about 16 to 17 were from rural and regional Australia. In these sorts of issues I do not suppose the important thing is exact statistics. No-one disputes the fact that volunteering in a particular organisation increases people's confidence, gives them skills and gives them access to other organisations in the community. That happens in all volunteer organisations; I do not dispute that. I just want to point that out for perhaps any studies done in the future to have a look at. As you say, 42 of your centres are in non-metropolitan areas.

**CHAIR**—There is a question here, Sophie?

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—Yes, there is a question. Do you fundamentally see your role as continuing to be a volunteer organisation or would you like to see yourself change into an organisation with a significant army of, effectively, paid employees conducting the tasks currently undertaken by volunteers?

**Ms Smith**—No, we do not see our organisation changing fundamentally from being a volunteer organisation to paying employees. That certainly is not the intention of the recommendation. Of those volunteers who come to volunteer with us, some would like to enter into paid work and many of them do not have, for whatever reason, the confidence or opportunity to do that. Our suggestion there was to provide pathways into New Apprenticeships schemes, not to make them paid workers of Lifeline. Obviously the process—how that might occur—is something that has to be thought through so that it does not de facto become paid jobs within Lifeline but so that there is a pathway. The recommendation was really about providing initial opportunities for people who are volunteers who might not otherwise have those opportunities.

**CHAIR**—You have gone one step further than some of the other volunteer organisation, which have simply called for volunteer experience to be recognised as prior learning into a possible certificate course that the industry may have. The classic example we heard was in Brisbane in relation to the aged care sector. We heard about the skills that you learn in caring for your loved one or working in a nursing home, which can perhaps be used to get some RPL and move on. You have gone one step further by asking for this to be linked into a traineeship or an apprenticeship.

**Ms Smith**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—If that is the view of the Lifeline, that is fine.

**Ms Blunt**—I would like to expand on that to clarify it. The only scheme we had seen that our paid employees were accessing and which was of benefit to them and to the Lifeline centre was the New Apprenticeships scheme. We were not really proposing that we would become part of that. We are looking for some way that we could access the benefits of that for our volunteers.

**Ms PANOPOULOS**—What do you mean?

**Ms Blunt**—For example, there could be some way in which their training costs could be supported or offset by a scheme and in which the centre that undertakes and delivers all that

training gets some financial contribution from the government for the role that they play. We may have been a little too specific about that particular scheme. We are looking for some way to get assistance for the people who are doing our training and for our trainers, our centres. That could happen in many ways; we are not necessarily wanting to fit in with the existing scheme, but if we could have something like that for our volunteers and our centres that would be helpful.

**CHAIR**—Is Lifeline part of the mutual obligation program?

**Ms Smith**—Do you mean Work for the Dole?

**CHAIR**—Yes.

**Ms Smith**—Yes. Many of the centres—although not all—participate in the Work for the Dole program, or the mutual obligation program.

**Ms VAMVAKINO**—While we are on the issue of volunteerism, my understanding of working with Lifeline, in particular, is that many young people saw it as almost a necessary thing to do as part of a curriculum vitae to help with getting other jobs. Certainly when I did it I was a young person. I have noticed a significant decrease in that—and you probably have more contact. Young people do not value or understand the importance of volunteer work in creating pathways for them, and perhaps employers are not, as they did years ago, appreciating and giving credence to people who have done volunteer work. Do you see a role for volunteer organisations such as Lifeline in providing pathways, keeping young people focused and giving them opportunities? I am not talking about an ad hoc thing but about more substantial status and recognition by schools, employers and society in general.

**Ms Smith**—I agree entirely with you. I think that in some places that does happen but in other places it does not.

**Ms VAMVAKINO**—It has dropped off, though, amongst younger people. There are a lot of women returning to work, but there is also the issue of young people.

**CHAIR**—Are any of your counselling services done on a face-to-face basis?

**Ms Smith**—Yes.

**CHAIR**—What proportion?

**Ms Smith**—Probably about 25 per cent of the Lifeline centres offer free face-to-face counselling services.

**CHAIR**—So that is an added skill. Thank you very much for coming in and for your submission. You have given us something a little controversial to think about. There is no doubt that Lifeline is a volunteer organisation that is held in the highest esteem, certainly by all of us as members of parliament and by the community in general. Congratulations to you, Evelyn and Patricia, for the skills that you have got and for going on to education and jobs. It has been great to hear your stories first hand.



Resolved (on motion by **Mr Dutton**):

That this committee authorises publication of the transcript of the evidence given before it at public hearing this day.

**Committee adjourned at 12.30 p.m.**