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SENATE

COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Reference: Poverty and financial hardship

WEDNESDAY, 28 MAY 2003

SYDNEY

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SENATE
COMMUNITY AFFAIRS REFERENCES COMMITTEE

Wednesday, 28 May 2003

Members: Senator Hutchins (*Chair*), Senator Knowles (*Deputy Chair*), Senators Humphries, Lees, McLucas and Moore

Participating members: Senators Abetz, Bishop, Carr, Chapman, Coonan, Crossin, Denman, Eggleston, Chris Evans, Faulkner, Ferguson, Ferris, Forshaw, Harradine, Harris, Lightfoot, Ludwig, Mason, McGauran, Murphy, Nettle, Payne, Tierney, Watson and Webber

Senators in attendance: Senators Hutchins, Knowles and Moore

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on:

1. a) the extent, nature and financial cost of
 - i) poverty and inequality in Australia
 - ii) poverty amongst working Australians
 - iii) child poverty in Australia; and
 - iv) poverty in Australian communities and regions;
- b) the social and economic impact of changes in the distribution of work, the level of remuneration from work and the impact of underemployment and unemployment;
- c) the effectiveness of income-support payments in protecting individuals and households from poverty; and
- d) the effectiveness of other programs and supports in reducing cost pressures on individual and household budgets, and building their capacity to be financially self-sufficient
2. That in undertaking its inquiry, the committee also examine:
 - a) the impact of changing industrial conditions on the availability, quality and reward for work; and
 - b) current efforts and new ideas, in both Australia and other countries, to identify and address poverty amongst working and non-working individuals and households.

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Committee met at 9.07 a.m.**FINGLAND, Mrs Sharon Ruth, Program Manager, Accessible City, Fairfield City Council****LALICH, Mr Nickola, Mayor, Fairfield City Council****JOGIA, Ms Diane Margaret, Manager, Community Services, Holroyd City Council****KILLIAN, Ms Debbie, Director, Library and Community Services, Holroyd City Council****PRANTS, Mr Alar Peter, Community Projects Officer, Holroyd City Council**

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from Fairfield City Council and Holroyd City Council. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. The committee prefers evidence to be heard in public but evidence may also be taken in camera if such evidence is considered by you to be of a confidential nature. The committee has before it your submissions. I now invite you to make an opening presentation, which will be followed by questions from the committee.

Mrs Fingland—Fairfield city, located 32 kilometres south-west of Sydney, covers an area of 104 square kilometres and includes 27 suburbs. While mainly residential, the city contains large industrial estates at Wetherill Park and Smithfield as well as local industrial centres. There are two major business and retail centres at Fairfield and Cabramatta, a growing centre in Prairiewood and a number of suburban shopping centres. Large expanses of rural land currently characterise the suburbs of Horsley Park and Cecil Park.

In 2001 Fairfield contained over 190,000 people, making it the sixth most populated local government area in Australia. There was a significant increase in migration levels to the city over the period 1981 to 2001. Housing people from over 130 different nationalities, Fairfield now has the highest level of immigrants and is one of the most ethnically diverse areas not just in Australia but in the world. At the time of the last census, in the Fairfield local government area more than half of all residents were born overseas, mostly in non-English-speaking countries. The majority of residents speak a language other than English at home—the most common being Vietnamese, Italian, Cantonese and Spanish.

Fairfield has an acute shortage of public housing and has been identified as one of the highest demand areas for public housing in the state. It is one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged areas of Western Sydney. Severe disadvantage, however, is no longer the sole preserve of the larger public housing estates. Large sections of the city suffering multiple disadvantage have a very low proportion of public housing. Income levels are generally low for local residents. In 2001 the median individual annual income was \$14,660, or \$282 per week, and the median weekly family income was \$811. These represent some of the lowest income levels in Sydney.

Most damaging of all, parts of the city still experience some of the highest levels of unemployment in New South Wales. The unemployment rate for Fairfield as a whole in 2001 was more than double the Sydney rate. Of even more concern is that the labour force participation rate for Fairfield was also much lower and has been dropping over the years. In

eight of Fairfield's suburbs the unemployment rate exceeded 17 per cent, and in Cabramatta, with 21 per cent unemployment, the rate was almost three and a half times the metropolitan average at that time. The culture now in many households in Fairfield is one of intergenerational unemployment. This presents situations where no role model of work, study or positive school practice exists. Involvement of our residents in identifying and addressing solutions to these issues is critical.

In 2001, 14 per cent of all households in Fairfield were estimated to be in housing stress; that is, paying more than 30 per cent of their income in rent or mortgage repayments. Of these households, 31 per cent were in rental stress and 24 per cent were in purchaser stress. Given that housing in the region is seen as more affordable than elsewhere in Sydney, this is a particularly noteworthy finding. A large proportion, 46 per cent, of the total households suffering housing stress in greater Western Sydney were concentrated in the four areas of Blacktown, Fairfield, Liverpool and Holroyd. In terms of the key issues which we put in our proposal, we were saying that areas such as Fairfield are not homogeneous. Census data averages therefore hide pockets of severe socioeconomic disadvantage. We have some areas that are high income and some areas that are low income, and the average is quite hidden in there.

Low levels of access to housing influence poverty at a number of levels, and the homeless suffer severely. A high proportion of the population are on Department of Housing waiting lists and have to wait 10 years or more to be housed. More and more people are being forced to rent, with private rental becoming a tenure of constraint rather than choice. Urban renewal of areas of private strata titled rental accommodation is difficult to achieve and would result in displacement of those in most need. Few agencies are building low-cost housing for rent, and closure and redevelopment of residential caravan and relocatable home parks cause severe disadvantage for families on low incomes. Carers of family members with disabilities are at a particular risk of suffering poverty. Lack of access to adequate public transport influences poverty levels too. Residents are forced to rely on expensive private transport options. Local residents are disadvantaged due to a lack of equitable concession rates compared with those provided to the more affluent areas of Sydney. Consideration also needs to be given to the accessibility options available for our ageing population when they are no longer able to drive.

In conclusion, we are saying that poverty has many dimensions and is rarely the result of one single factor. The lack of an integrated approach to solving complex urban problems contributes to socioeconomic disadvantage and poverty. While recognised for its cultural diversity, there are other factors that characterise Fairfield City's community. The city is far from homogeneous. Variations between one part of the city and another are important indicators of deprivation. Lack of housing amenity, households without access to a car, high unemployment—particularly for males—and poor English proficiency are greater problems in some suburbs than others.

Parts of Fairfield have tended to house those citizens least able to exercise choice in terms of their jobs, homes and personal consumption. The physical character of the area has varied considerably depending on the functions and fortunes of particular urban settings at different times. Some suburbs have certain economic, social and physical characteristics that may be called multiple deprivation. While the characteristics are not necessarily interdependent or causally related, they tend to congregate in specific urban environments. In Fairfield there is a growing disparity between social groups and segregations by income. Parts of the city still experience some of the highest levels of unemployment in the state. The city also has lower than

average levels of participation in higher education. Individual, family and household incomes in Fairfield are lower than in the region or the Sydney metropolitan area as a whole and are amongst the lowest in the state.

Rapid and uncaring growth has created a legacy of deficiencies, and the area has seen greater concentrations of low-income families and the development of more culturally diverse communities than anywhere else in Australia. The problems to be tackled are substantial, encompassing a whole range of social, environmental and economic factors. In addition to a lack of access to health and welfare services and facilities, a far greater effort is needed to travel to work, to shopping opportunities, and to recreation and social facilities than in other parts of Sydney. The key lesson from local and national experience in neighbourhood renewal over the last decade is that linked problems require joined-up solutions; that is to say, partnership and place management opportunities have been demonstrated to provide the most effective and sustainable outcomes over the long term. Consequently, what is needed is a comprehensive and inclusive approach that draws together all stakeholders in planning for and addressing the full range of issues and challenges.

Studies of established urban areas of cities worldwide have furnished ample evidence that residents' state of wellbeing is affected by both their immediate surroundings—their living conditions in their own home—and the quality of the physical and social environment they share with others. These studies have shown that it is the social environment—activities and relationships—that is every bit as important to people as the character and condition of the buildings, streetscapes and open space. Much of the satisfaction and dissatisfaction with a place is associated with the changes that have taken place over a period of time. In parts of Fairfield City, the sense of the area's decline could be the most strongly felt deprivation of all. Fairfield City's challenge, with this vibrant and diverse city, is to help local people achieve the full benefits of community life by assisting people to overcome barriers such as low incomes, high unemployment, inadequate housing and negative media stereotyping.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mrs Fingland. Who would like to start the presentation for Holroyd City Council?

Ms Jogia—I would like to start Holroyd's presentation. Holroyd has written an extensive submission with a number of recommendations. I would like to speak about recommendations 4, 5 and 6 of our submission. Recommendations 4 and 5 concern the provision of emergency relief to residents who are experiencing acute poverty or may potentially find themselves in such a position. Recommendation 6 concerns the operation of the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Concerning emergency relief, local emergency relief providers are essential to provide information, support and material assistance to residents who are financially disadvantaged. Most of these organisations rely heavily on volunteers to operate their services. However, it is increasingly apparent that a paid coordinator or supervisor is essential for efficient, effective and accountable administration.

Emergency relief organisations are no longer the low-key places for a cup of tea and a friendly chat that they were in the past. They are expected to be competent and professional organisations and need to consider a whole raft of administrative and operational responsibilities such as policies and procedures; forward planning and budgeting; insurance; access and equity in services; volunteer recruitment, training and support; occupational health and safety;

performance reviews; incorporation requirements; annual audits; and annual reports. A paid coordinator facilitates the smooth operation of the service and is an important link between the decision making body, usually a management committee, and the service provision level, usually volunteers. The federal government is requested to provide increased funding for the administration of emergency relief providers so that they can employ qualified coordinators and make their services truly accessible to all people in need.

As an example from our local area, Holroyd Community Aid and Information Service receives \$110,000 per annum in emergency relief funding and is allowed to use up to \$5,000 for administration costs. The actual costs of administering that service from the last financial year were: wages and related items, \$33,372; volunteer costs, \$2,718; and phone, insurance, audit, bookkeeping et cetera, \$15,350. The costs for premises, electricity, water et cetera are actually covered by Holroyd City Council and are not included in those administration costs. So that is a significant amount of money going into administration and only \$5,000 from the government grant is allowed to go towards that. In view of the importance of local emergency relief providers in assisting people in situations of poverty, the federal government is urged to provide increased levels of funding for administration purposes.

The second aspect to do with the emergency relief funds concerns the amount of emergency relief funds provided to these agencies. The level of emergency relief funds allocated to agencies needs to be regularly reviewed to ensure it is adequate to meet needs. At present agencies can operate in two ways. Firstly, they can budget their funds on a weekly or monthly basis and so continually adjust levels of aid being given to clients, often knowing that they are unable to provide realistic levels of assistance to meet the needs of those clients. Secondly, they can provide a more realistic level of aid to all eligible clients who come through their door and run the risk of exhausting the funds before their next grant payment is due thereby not being able to help anybody at all for a period of time. The level of funds given to emergency relief providers must be regularly reviewed and increased if appropriate. To adequately address local client needs, the Holroyd Community Aid and Information Service estimates it would require approximately a 30 per cent increase in its funding level.

The final point I would like to briefly address concerns the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme. Holroyd City Council is concerned about regular comments and suggestions that the level of copayments in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme should be increased. Of particular concern is the potential impact of such increases on people with disabilities, who can experience many areas of disadvantage in their daily lives. Those who have significant medication needs and essential equipment needs are at the greatest disadvantage and are most vulnerable to any increases in Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme copayments. They often have very high costs as far as equipment and medical and health supplies are concerned and any increase in PBS copayments can put them into a very difficult situation as far as their finances are concerned. So the federal government is requested not to increase copayment levels in the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme.

Mr Prants—My presentation will illustrate the incidence of poverty in the Holroyd local government area, highlight the relationship between the issues of housing and education, and suggest recommendations for changes to federal government policies. In June 1999 the Society of St Vincent de Paul commissioned a study into poverty and wealth in Western Sydney and outer south-western Sydney titled *The great divide: poverty and wealth in Western and outer*

south-western Sydney. The principal consultant for the study was Professor Tony Vinson, Emeritus Professor, School of Social Work, from the University of New South Wales. The study found two key points: poverty within Western Sydney and south-western Sydney is concentrated in particular suburbs and the suburbs with the highest concentration of public housing are the most disadvantaged.

The Holroyd experience is similar to the St Vincent de Paul study, but there are other impacting factors. Firstly, Holroyd does not have large New South Wales Department of Housing estates, which are commonly found throughout Western Sydney. In the City of Holroyd approximately eight per cent of total dwellings are owned by the Department of Housing. This equates to roughly 2,645 properties. Of those properties, 65 per cent are units in residential flat zones. These flat zones also contain 48.5 per cent of the city's private rental market. It is in these residential flat zones that the majority of Holroyd's low-income families live. These residential flat zones are predominantly found along the railway corridors passing through the suburbs of Pendle Hill, Wentworthville, Westmead, Merrylands and Guildford. The median rent in Holroyd for a one-bedroom unit is \$150 per week and for a two-bedroom unit it is \$215 per week. Furthermore, the median rent for a three-bedroom house is \$240 per week. These figures highlight one of the major issues in Holroyd: that there are too few private housing options for low-income families, single persons and, in particular, young people.

CHAIR—I assume that is unfurnished housing?

Mr Prants—Yes, it is unfurnished housing within the private rental market. Holroyd has 22,519 families of which 4,467, or 19.8 per cent, have an income of less than \$500 per week, including Commonwealth rental assistance. These families that are not in public housing are certainly in housing stress; that is, they are spending close to half their income on rental accommodation, leaving them with almost no disposable income once food and utility bills are taken out.

The New South Wales Department of Housing metropolitan business plan 2002-05 states that, metropolitan wide, approximately 800 new units will be achieved over the next two years. Specifically to Holroyd, there are currently approximately 1,800 applications for public housing outstanding. The few dwellings that will be allocated for Holroyd will certainly have no impact on reducing the current waiting list. On this evidence, council initially supported the view that the federal government could help low-income families and at the same time take pressure off waiting lists for social housing by increasing the amount of Commonwealth rental assistance received by families, especially in Sydney where rents are higher. However, council has received advice from local tenancy services and housing services that any increase in Commonwealth rental assistance will only drive up rents; therefore nullifying any intended benefit to low-income families. It is now council's position that those families are best served by allocating extra funding to the state government through the Commonwealth-state housing agreement for the provision of more social housing.

Also highlighted in council's submission are the barriers faced by young people and people with a disability and/or mental illness in securing low-cost housing in the private rental market. One of these barriers is the use of tenant databases by real estate agents. New provisions were made under the Commonwealth Privacy Act affecting tenant databases. These provisions commenced on 21 December 2002. These provisions need to be reviewed because they do not

effectively address many of the problems that still exist. For example, the legislation does not address pre-existing listings. Tenants may pay off their debt but remain on the tenant databases for up to five years.

Another barrier is the lack of security of tenure for those who are living in boarding houses. In May 1995 the then Commonwealth Department of Housing and Regional Development had a report prepared by Kennedy, See and Sutherland titled *Minimum legislative standards for residential tenancies in Australia*. Despite the fact that the findings in this report were never followed up, they are still relevant today. For example, in New South Wales there is still no legislation addressing the plight of boarders and lodgers, who are the most vulnerable and marginalised of those in the private rental market. New South Wales governments have failed to enact legislation amending the tenancy act to cover boarders and lodgers. Thus, if they are evicted, they cannot seek to enforce any rights currently available to other tenants through the residential tenancy tribunal. The Commonwealth could link funding to the states to enacting reform legislation that meets the benchmarks outlined in the *Minimum legislative standards for residential tenancies in Australia* report.

Due to the many barriers faced by people with mental illness and disability in accessing private rental accommodation, social housing providers are struggling to meet the demands placed on them. A lot of these tenants have high support needs and, importantly, the provision of housing needs to be matched with appropriate support services. Unfortunately, social housing providers currently do not have the resources to meet the special needs of these tenants. Council therefore strongly recommends that the states be given extra funding to develop appropriate support for tenants with special needs.

Many Australians see education as a way of overcoming poverty, in that the better the qualifications one has, the greater the ability one has to earn a high income. Unfortunately, families caught in the poverty trap also have compounding problems with health and social issues. In other words, children from low-income families tend to have learning difficulties because of social problems at home and poor health. The federal government provides various funding programs to the states, such as the Strategic Assistance for Improving Student Outcomes Program. In New South Wales this money is used for the Priority Schools Funding Program. The broad goals of the program are based on the National Goals for Schooling in the 21st Century and the National Literacy and Numeracy Plan.

What this actually means is that learning outcomes of educationally disadvantaged students should improve over time and match those of other students. Schools eligible for funding must have high concentrations of students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds. Schools within Holroyd do not have high concentrations of such students but do have small concentrations of students who come from areas where there are deep pockets of poverty. In any case, these schools are ineligible for funding, and students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds therefore miss out on the extra resources needed to help them obtain better educational outcomes.

The New South Wales Teachers Federation commissioned Professor Tony Vinson to conduct an inquiry into the provision of public education in New South Wales. In brief, the inquiry found the following key points. On education funding, Australia ranks 22nd out of 29 OECD countries in terms of investment in education. Combined Commonwealth and state government

expenditure since 1996 has given private schools a 45.1 per cent increase per capita in funding compared with 27.4 per cent to public schools. This shift in funding is providing support for parents who choose to send their children to non-government schools. Unfortunately for families on low incomes, sending their children to private schools will never be a realistic option. However, there are Catholic schools which support students from low-income families. The Vinson inquiry recommends that payments to private schools be reduced by making 25 per cent of the funding linkage more needs based. Council supports the view that funding from the Commonwealth should be linked to needs based planning.

Many schools not only play the educator role but actively engage with their local communities by becoming community hubs. At these schools, playgroups are being organised and run. Parenting programs are provided and so are literacy and numeracy programs and computer classes for parents. There are also self-help groups being established. Some of these schools are able to get initial funds through the state government's Families First program and other funding schemes. These programs have been very successful but, once again, they have targeted areas where there are high concentrations of public housing, and so areas such as Holroyd totally miss out. Council therefore recommends that the federal government develop a program of additional funding for schools based on the socioeconomic profile of the school community and tied to the development of a local management plan to meet identified local needs.

Ms Killian—I am going to speak briefly about issues relating to the ethnically diverse community in Holroyd and in Western Sydney generally and, in particular, to asylum seekers on temporary visas. Like many parts of Western Sydney, Holroyd is a community of considerable ethnic diversity, and recent immigrants and refugees are some of the more vulnerable members of our community. In their early years of settlement, many immigrants experience poverty due to a range of barriers. Poor English language skills, poor job skills, little knowledge of local employment markets and lack of personal support networks complicate their efforts to reach an income level which allows basic needs to be met.

Refugees experience additional issues which exacerbate these barriers. These may be related to past traumatic experiences. These factors increase the vulnerability of refugees to poverty as they attempt to build a new life in Australia and make the settlement phase much more difficult to move past. These are significant factors for any examination of poverty in Australia but, recently, there are a number of groups who are even more vulnerable than those with refugee backgrounds and permanent resident status. They are the people holding temporary protection visas—that is, asylum seekers who have been assessed as refugees requiring protection but who arrived in Australia without valid entry documents and people who are holding bridging visas. There are a number of different categories of bridging visas, and I will talk a bit more about them later. These visas come with considerable restrictions, which have a direct impact on the ability of the holder and their dependants to obtain a viable level of income.

There are estimated to be 4,000 TPV holders in New South Wales. One of the things that concerns Holroyd City Council is that the numbers of TPV holders in each local government area are not really known, and there is not much data about the depth or details of their poverty. What we do know, though, is that temporary protection visas, as the name suggests, have a limited life of three years. So at about 30 months into the visa, the holders, if they consider themselves to be still at risk if they were to return to the home country, need to apply for another visa. The intention of the policy is that, generally, they will never be given permanent resident

status and will be returned at some point when the home country is safer. There is no access to family reunion programs even for immediate family and there is no automatic right to return if they leave Australia.

TPV holders are eligible for Centrelink special benefits payments, but the recipients are required to register with a Job Network provider and they are not eligible for intensive assistance programs. This means that most of the training and placement services which have proved very successful in placing in work those migrants and refugees with the same types of job readiness issues are not accessible to TPV holders. The special benefit payment is activity tested, a complex and demanding program for someone whose English language skills are likely to be poor and whose knowledge of the Australian welfare system is more or less non-existent.

Like Job Search recipients, TPV holders can be breached for failure to show sufficient job-seeking activity, for moving to an area where work is harder to obtain or for failing to attend an interview or advise of a change in circumstances. The first breaches result in percentage reductions in benefits, and eventually the benefit is cancelled. TPV holders are not eligible for classes under adult migrant English programs. There are some English classes provided through community agencies, but these programs usually provide only very limited hours of tuition. Although they are eligible to participate in tertiary studies, TPV holders must do so as overseas students. This means, generally, that they must pay full tuition fees, and so very few have the opportunity to study in this way.

TPV holders are also not eligible for settlement support services beyond basic information provision and referral. The impact of this ineligibility is that they cannot receive support from migrant resource centres or Community Settlement Service Scheme funded agencies. For example, in this area that includes ethnic community agencies like that of the Afghan community, who have a grant from the CSSS. They cannot provide services to TPV holders in their community and, as a very small agency, it is very difficult and divisive to be providing to one section of your community and not the other.

Western Sydney has a strong network of migrant resource centres and CSSS providers who play a key role in direct support for individuals and in fostering and supporting the work of unfunded sections of ethnic communities. These services have played an important role in the relatively successful settlement of wave after wave of migrants and refugees in Western Sydney since the late 1970s. The organisations which therefore have the most expertise in dealing with the complex issues facing TPV refugees are excluded from providing help. As a result, generalist agencies and small agencies for newly arrived communities to which TPV holders might belong are struggling to meet their support needs. Council are concerned about what we see as a significant stress on existing agencies as well as an inability to meet the needs of the people who are presenting for help.

The barriers to finding any work, the likelihood of being exploited in underpaid work and the likelihood of losing benefits due to failure to comply with requirements are very high for this group. Further exacerbating this is the higher incidence of mental distress—especially anxiety, depression and post traumatic disorders experienced by refugees as a result of their prearrival experiences—and the potential for further trauma if they have experienced long periods of detention after arrival. Placed alongside the lack of certainty about what the future holds, which

is the consequence of temporary visas and the separation from close loved ones, it is easy to see that these people are in a very poor position to cope with or change their low-income status.

I have spoken mostly about temporary protection visas. I will speak briefly on bridging visas, which are rather complex. There are a number of different categories, and I am not going to try to talk about all of them. The conditions vary. Some of them allow a person to work and some of them do not. One category that is new and is of particular concern is the visa given in recent cases to asylum seekers who have agreed to be repatriated to their country of origin. When this cannot be accomplished, due either to danger in that country or to political issues with that country, the length of time before the government will be able to bring about their repatriation is unknown. The courts have ruled that these people cannot be held indefinitely in detention, so they have been released. They have no access to benefits or services. The House of Welcome, a volunteer agency just down the road in Carramar which receives no government funding, has advised that these people are given a card with only a number on it, not even their name. They have to telephone five times a week to report in—'I am number 134' or whatever; that is the monitoring—and they have to present to the police twice a week and show their card. They are completely without resources: they have no income, no right to work and no support system, except for agencies or volunteers such as the House of Welcome.

In relation to this, an additional recommendation that Holroyd City Council would like to make, assuming that the premise of the immigration policy is accepted—that is, that the protection provided by these temporary visas covers our obligations under the Geneva convention and that the visa holders are not to get permanent resident status at any point—is that there is an argument to do more to assist them while they are here in this country. Given that the countries from which these TPV holders originate are generally countries to which Australia provides foreign aid, it would be a sound investment in the future of those countries to provide more to TPV holders during their stay here. By providing access to services which assist them in gaining skills and employment, we would be decreasing the incidence of poverty among these people during their stay in Australia. If we did this successfully, the economic burden on the welfare system would also be reduced. In addition, we would be sending people back, when we finally do send them back, with skills, possibly savings and certainly a great deal more resilience to be of use to their own country and to be able to survive in their own country.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Ms Killian. So that would be recommendation 13, would it?

Ms Killian—Yes.

Senator KNOWLES—I would like to ask Mrs Fingland some questions to start with. I notice from your submission that public transport is an issue for you. While that is not a federal issue, I am interested to know what has been done and what is planned to alleviate the problems that you describe in your submission.

Mrs Fingland—There has been some investment in our area by the state government through the provision of the Liverpool to Parramatta rapid bus transit way, which will assist parts of Fairfield by linking areas of high unemployment—suburbs like Bonnyrigg—with the Smithfield-Wetherill Park employment area. That area previously was not accessible at all from large swathes of the western part of our LGA for people to get between the employment area and where they live. The infrastructure has just opened for that, and that will certainly start to assist.

However, there are still very large areas of not just Fairfield but Western Sydney that people moved into in the past, as part of the urban development program, because they were cheap. These areas were cheap partly because they were inaccessible, in terms of not only public transport but also other human services. The population who have grown up there have been highly dependent on cars as the only form of transport they can use. We are very concerned that, as they age and get to the stage when they can no longer drive a car, we are going to have high pockets of social isolation. We have not got adequate transport to serve those areas. We see that as a looming problem as part of the ageing of the population.

Senator KNOWLES—Are you in constant contact with the state government to try to resolve that problem before it gets worse? As you say, the ageing population creates a problem that is foreseeable.

Mrs Fingland—Yes.

Senator KNOWLES—What is happening about planning to avoid what you described?

Mrs Fingland—Through a group of councils in Western Sydney, through a WSROC project, we are actually seeking to provide—

CHAIR—Do you want to explain what WSROC is? Senator Knowles is a Western Australian and Senator Moore is a Queenslander.

Senator KNOWLES—We are from the far-flung states.

Mrs Fingland—WSROC is the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, which actually comprises 13 councils—that is, 11 councils plus two from the MACROC, the Macarthur Regional Organisation of Councils. The councils have got together to produce a regional vision for Western Sydney. We are working to present that in conjunction with our state counterparts. Transport for Western Sydney is one of the major issues coming out of that process of analysis, so we are trying to work very much in partnership with the state government to highlight these particular issues and to try to find measures to support them. We certainly believe that working in partnership is the only answer to this, but the issue is so large that it is not something that local government and state government can achieve in isolation. I think we need participation by all three levels of government. One of the things we put in our submission was that we felt programs such as the Building Better Cities program actually highlighted a lot of the connections and causes that underlie poverty. In planning for the future we need, if we can, to reinstate those sorts of programs so that we can all work together to solve these sorts of issues. They are very large issues for us in Western Sydney.

Senator KNOWLES—I notice in your submission that you also talk about the potential for poverty among families with disabilities. I do not think anyone would disagree with that; there is a huge potential because families do an amazing job to look after their own disabled, and for that very reason some years ago carer's payments were made more reasonable and available for carers of people in homes. You list potential factors there. What would you see as a solution to that? You list the high costs of care, medication, home modification, accessible equipment et cetera. That is a pretty big shopping list. What would be a first-point solution to solving that problem?

Mrs Fingland—In the same way that I highlighted the issue of the lack of access to public transport for areas of Sydney, perhaps increasing the transport accessibility for people—which would actually cover the needs of not just carers but also a whole host of people who are disadvantaged in Western Sydney—might be the first area where we could start targeting extra efforts.

Senator KNOWLES—The disabled group is not a homogeneous group that just sit in a block so that we can run a bus past their front door. It is a very different demand, isn't it?

Mrs Fingland—It is, and it is quite a complex demand. I am not sure that I actually have a particular solution other than saying that, again, I think it is a linked set of problems that they suffer. By looking at the problems individually we are not going to come up with a solution to help such a complex problem; we actually have to look at a whole host of different things to assist them. It is only by looking at all of those things that we can actually make a difference.

Senator KNOWLES—Would you be able to tell me—and I ask both councils this question—of any terrific innovative programs that you have put in place to help people in need that could be replicated elsewhere?

Mrs Fingland—We are very conscious of the fact that in areas such as Fairfield there is a great need to build social capital. A lot of people in the area feel so disadvantaged that they actually feel there is no particular solution to their problems. Whilst we are not direct service providers as a council, we do have a number of programs through which we are attempting to build the social capital in the area and help our communities to help themselves. One such program that was run recently was called Second-Hand Saturday where people in local streets were encouraged to come together and hold what were similar to garage sales but done on a community basis. That brought a whole host of communities together from different cultural backgrounds and started to build some of the social capital in the area; it had a good environmental outcome as well.

Senator KNOWLES—It would be a good social event too, wouldn't it?

Mrs Fingland—Exactly. So there are a number of initiatives like that that Fairfield council has initiated. As I said, the emphasis is to try to build the social capital for the people in the area, for those in most need.

Senator KNOWLES—Would you mind providing to the committee on notice information on any other programs that you have put together that have just slipped your mind at the moment?

Mrs Fingland—Yes, I would be happy to.

Senator KNOWLES—Thank you.

Ms Jogia—I would also like to make a comment about that. I guess you are referring to people with disabilities or to that area?

Senator KNOWLES—Generally.

Ms Jogia—In general, one of the issues I have seen with people is the difficulty in obtaining services such as home care. It is often very difficult for people to get any level of support or assistance because there is so much demand and they are just told, ‘Look, I’m sorry, we do not have facilities available at the moment to help you.’ I think they got to the stage where the situation was so critical that they were not even taking people for a waiting list. So that lack of resources in the home care service has affected people who are in need.

Senator KNOWLES—What is the council doing about that?

Ms Jogia—I think all the council can do is lobby and make that need clear.

Ms Killian—I think that answer is actually a reference back to your question about what we see as major issues rather than the question about our innovative programs.

Senator KNOWLES—So you are getting your plug in first, are you?

Ms Killian—While we are talking about programs that are desperately short, the other one that cannot go without a mention for people with disabilities is the equipment program, the PADP program. We have people being discharged from hospital who cannot get an electric wheelchair when that is what they need. They wait months and months, which makes an enormous difference to their quality of life. That program is stretched very tight right across all of Western Sydney. I do not know about elsewhere.

Ms Jogia—In regard to the innovation aspect, Holroyd council is one of the few councils that actually has a disability services team. We have a support worker and we also have a peer support coordinator who is responsible for developing and running out of hours programs for people with intellectual disabilities. Through that team, and particularly through the team leader—the disabilities support worker—we resource the Holroyd City Access Committee. This committee has been in operation for about 12 years now. It comprises community representatives, service provider representatives and councillors. They meet quarterly to look at access needs and access requests from across the community. That committee has a \$50,000 annual budget to look, particularly, at improving access. It has done a lot of good work. That is an ongoing committee which I think has achieved excellent results for the local community.

The other area that is facilitated by the team is our access policy and action plan, which is based on council services and facilities and what we are doing to meet the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act. That is a regular two-year plan with six-monthly reviews and implementation reports which makes sure that council is looking at making its own services and facilities accessible to people with a disability.

Ms Killian—Sharon mentioned social capital. The council does a lot of work which is really important in Western Sydney. Sharon also mentioned the bad press that Western Sydney gets, and for those of who you do not live in Sydney you probably do not know how extreme that is. Having grown up in Western Australia, I was shocked when I came here to discover how big a deal that is in New South Wales. The recent additional bad press, particularly about Muslim and Arabic speaking communities, puts further pressure on the community and erodes the social capital. It has an impact on people. Basically, the poorer they are, the more impact it has if the area they live in feels unsafe and gets bad press. We invest a fair bit of energy in doing positive

things. We have a Holroyd City Fest program each year where we run quite a broad range of different activities right across the local government area. This aims to be inclusive and to build a sense of a community heading in a positive direction. So those kinds of programs are really important too, I think, in that social capital process.

Mrs Finland—Yes, we have a number of festivals too.

Senator KNOWLES—I would like to ask Holroyd City Council about its request for increased funding for administration purposes to emergency relief providers and reviewing the level of emergency relief funds allocated to agencies. That is a fairly big-ticket item. Have you given any consideration to what level of funding you would consider appropriate, whether or not you would consider that that should be replicated right across Australia and what impact that would have in dollar terms?

Ms Jogia—I certainly have not looked at it across Australia because I think there will be different situations in different organisations across Australia. We have based our information on the local agency, which just provides emergency relief. I think there are some agencies that do a lot more than that and have an administration set up already. The local agency just provides emergency relief in Holroyd.

Senator KNOWLES—So what do you believe would be the ticket item for just this area?

Ms Jogia—I think the main thing that that particular agency requires is assistance with money for paying a coordinator, to actually have a professional person there heading up the operations of the organisation.

Senator KNOWLES—Are we talking in terms of \$30,000 or \$40,000?

Ms Jogia—Around the level of \$30,000.

Senator KNOWLES—So we are talking only about a salary as opposed to the administration of the office?

Ms Jogia—Yes, that is looking at the salary level. That organisation runs an opportunity shop to help raise some money to cover other administration costs, such as the telephone and audit and that type of thing.

Senator KNOWLES—What did you say you pick up?

Ms Jogia—Council provides the premises and therefore pays the electricity and water and all those types of things.

Ms Killian—It should be noted that there are a lot of funded agencies who have to manage to find that out of their own grants, right across the local government area. Whilst council is happy to contribute in that way, it is not really what we see as core business. We might see it as our core business to provide very affordable rental, but it is certainly a cost to council to pick up all of those costs. We do it happily because it is a positive service and it needs to be done, but it is not equitable to other services.

Senator MOORE—I am interested because we are coming up against the process between the different levels of government. No matter where we go, it is ‘federal’, ‘state’ and ‘local’. Everyone is nodding. Tell me how you think they all work together. You are representing the council level. You have come up with submissions here about the issues in your local area. Your recommendations all relate to federal and state, but my question is about integration—how the levels of government, from your perspective at local government, should be working together on this issue and perhaps where you think we are not. That question is to everybody.

Ms Killian—What comes to my mind first is our experience of working on programs that aim to integrate the different levels of service. Obviously, there are huge problems with the fragmented and different approaches, not only for federal and state government but for their funded programs as well. So there is stuff everywhere out there, and having it work together, knowing what each other is doing and providing services to the community in a really seamless way is always a challenge.

We have some experience here in Western Sydney from the Families First program that Peter mentioned before. It is a state funded program which, in addition to providing money for extra services, specifically aims to bring together different agencies, and it is focused at a state and local level. The bottom line of all that is that it is an enormous amount of work to do that in our complex system, but the outcomes that we are getting, even at early stages, are really very strong. The potential to have really significant differences in service delivery with marginal increases in funding are there. It is those efficiencies, but it is efficiencies that are about knowing what each other does and knowing what each other does so well that you can actually change what you do a bit to fit in better with what is needed locally—planning together and that kind of thing. That is why we were making the recommendation around education.

When I say ‘marginal’ cost, there is a resource cost. That takes time, and all these agencies that need to come together have a full case load, a full admin load and all of that kind of stuff, so it needs to be funded to have time to make that stuff work. But we have seen some really exceptional changes in services. We are starting to see them in Western Sydney. And in south-western Sydney, where that program has been longer, we can see that that is really coming about. So I would certainly recommend it, but it does take active effort and a bit of funding.

Senator MOORE—Are there similar circumstances in Fairfield?

Mrs Fingland—Yes, I would say there are.

CHAIR—I understand the mayor of Fairfield would like to join in some of the discussions.

Mayor Lalich—Thank you for the opportunity to make a statement. I have lived all my life in Fairfield City, apart from three years of it when I was a little child. I have lived in Liverpool and in Fairfield since about 1951. I remember Cabramatta and Fairfield when they were sleepy little towns and you could just about park anywhere you wanted to. You cannot any more.

In Fairfield, as was indicated earlier, we have just under 200,000 people. We have 130 different nationalities and something like 50 or 60 different religions. My problem—and this is my opinion—is what has happened since the Second World War. I am part of that: my family were immigrants to this country; we came here in 1948. There has been massive immigration to

this area due to the fact that we had Villawood hostel, Cabramatta hostel and East Hills hostel, which are all within probably 10 kilometres. People who were dumped or placed into the melting pot—whatever you want to call it—never migrated very far from where they were put, the same as in America with Harlem and the Bronx. People stay where their people originally came. We all stayed there.

It is my belief that the federal government in that time has put very little money into the western suburbs and, in particular, into Fairfield—and I am speaking for Fairfield, but I would also like to represent the whole of the western suburbs. The federal government has put in very little funds to match the massive immigration. They have left it all to the state government. They have left it all to the local communities. We have CCTV in Cabramatta—nearly 20 cameras. That is costing us \$400,000 a year. We pay for that; the community pays for it.

Senator MOORE—For the record, what is the CCTV?

Mayor Lalich—The CCTV is the community television—the cameras on streets to pick up drugs. My belief is that the drug and crime problem is a national problem. It is not a local problem. It is because of this immigration and the people who stay here. Had immigration been more widely spread throughout the cities—the North Shore, eastern suburbs and all the rest—you would not have the concentration of these communities in this area, and we would not have the problems. Now we have these people here—and we are a harmonious people. I wish a lot of countries overseas could find the magic that we have in Australia with all the different communities. We have absolutely no problems between communities, and yet in other countries people from two different religions can kill each other for centuries.

My belief—and I hope the Senate inquiry can pick up on this—is that we need a lot more funding from the federal government into our area, to help us pay for the hospitals and, mainly, for the rail. I travelled on the trains back in the sixties when I was an apprentice, and I do not see the rail lines being any better now than they were back in the sixties. A massive amount of money is needed to fix up the rail system, and I believe that the only way we can get this is from the federal government. Consecutive governments—I am not blaming Liberal or Labor—since the Second World War have given very little funding to this area. Maybe in the early seventies to the mid-seventies there was a bit of input into the western suburbs to get us up to scratch and up to the latest technology with sewers and all the rest, which we did not have out here at that time. It took a long time but we did get it.

What we need is a lot more federal government funding into the area. Without federal government funding, the problems that we have out here in the western suburbs are going to stay. I believe their immigration policy over those 50 or 60 years has caused the problems we have now. That is all I wish to say.

CHAIR—Senator Moore, do you want to continue your questions?

Senator MOORE—Yes. This follows on in respect of the process in terms of the various levels of government looking at the community. Mrs Fingland, it is very difficult sitting beside your boss—it is always a special challenge—but, in terms of the situation, were you wanting to add anything to what Ms Killian said about the process in terms of the Families First program that Mr Prants mentioned in his submission?

Mrs Fingland—I am not sure that, coming from a planning background, I can add much more to that. I would like to make the point that one of the things we in local government find really difficult in coordinating with other levels of government is getting the message across that, when planning for the massive urban development that happens and is continuing to happen in areas like Western Sydney, it is not good enough just to draw plans and to not actually have programs agreed for the provision of both the physical and social infrastructure that is required. We in local government have great difficulty in getting that level of coordination and commitment from the other levels of government we work with.

Senator MOORE—You mentioned that the Families First program was focused specifically on state and local funding. Do you have any idea what it would take to draw in federal funding as well?

Ms Killian—That program focuses on families with children under eight years old and, in particular, newborn babies and toddlers under two. I do not really want to give a figure for what that was funded for, because I do not think it will be accurate, but it was over \$20 million across four or five years for New South Wales. That only focuses on one particular part of the community and does not encompass all of the range of services that one might want to actually start coordinating. But it is a jolly good start, because it encourages people from a range of agencies to start to learn those skills, and then they take them elsewhere. That was for New South Wales, and certainly in Western Sydney we think that we needed more than we got out of that—considerably more. So we need to start from there. The other thing of course is that, in our experience, we often work separately with the state government and the Commonwealth because they do not work together. I will leave that one to you guys to take up with them.

Mr Prants—I think the other issue is the division of power between the three levels of government. The state government is more hands on, of course, because it has child protection mandates and public housing mandates, which are not necessarily roles of the federal government through its powers under the Constitution. However, the Commonwealth gives large levels of tied and untied grants to the states. I think the Commonwealth needs to work more closely with the states on the planning process, on how that money is delivered to the states and on the ground in local communities.

Ms Killian—If that could be translated down to the local community so that we got good state and local planning processes going on with federal input—that is, with the federal government knowing what was going on in those planning processes—then we would be well ahead.

Mr Prants—Absolutely.

Senator MOORE—Do you think anyone understands who does what?

Ms Killian—We do not know them if they do.

Senator MOORE—In the Holroyd submission—and I also open this up to Fairfield—you talked particularly about hostels and boarding houses and about transition and availability. You also talked about the closure of the recreational caravan park type arrangements. Those things have huge impacts on housing and also security for people who are caught up in them. Is that a

problem that is shared by both your regions, and do you have any idea of the numbers that would be caught up in it?

CHAIR—Before you answer that, can I ask the Fairfield representatives, in particular, to elaborate on that question? On page 4 of your submission, you say:

Another emerging issue is the closure and re-development of residential parks, including caravan parks and manufactured home estates.

I understand what a caravan park is, but what is a manufactured home estate?

Senator MOORE—I have no idea either.

Mrs Finland—They are mobile homes. We have one of the last remaining mobile home parks in Fairfield. There have recently been some closed in the Blacktown local government area, and the owner of that particular caravan park in Fairfield is looking to redevelop that land. We are very concerned about the social impacts, the dislocation, for people living in that park, given that they are very low-income people.

CHAIR—What sorts of powers does the council have to prevent that sort of rezoning? Can you say no without going through some expensive Land and Environment Court exercises?

Mayor Lulich—The problem is that it depends on who the developer is. At the moment, a big developer owns the Landsdown caravan park, which is flood prone to some extent. A couple of hundred people, I think, are living there. The problem is that these big developers are not going to take no from the council; they will take it to the Land and Environment Court no matter what it costs. The problem for us is that we do not have the money to keep fighting that. We do not know to what extent the state government will fight them. We have set the standards we require—that is, to take care of the flooding, to look after the disadvantaged housing people and all the rest—on this proposed development. No development application has come to council yet, but we believe it is just matter of time before they end up railroading and steamrolling straight over the top of us, straight to the Land and Environment Court, where they will probably get all that approved. Then all these people who cannot afford normal housing, or who prefer that type of housing because they move around, are going to have nothing.

CHAIR—How many people will be affected by that?

Mrs Finland—I think it is in the order of 290, but I would need to confirm that.

CHAIR—And what will happen to them?

Mrs Finland—We are supposedly one of the most affordable areas in Western Sydney but in fact, given the rate at which housing prices have risen, there is nowhere in Fairfield that is affordable. I am not sure where these people will go.

CHAIR—On page 14 of the submission from the Holroyd City Council, we have a summary of the sorts of rents that are paid. Would you agree that rent is roughly the same in Fairfield or would you say it might be a little higher or lower?

Senator MOORE—Can you also comment on the availability? It is one thing to have the rent, but are there places available?

Mrs Fingland—We have actually put together some statistics from the census in relation to this. Individual and family incomes in Fairfield are amongst the lowest in the state. Nearly half of Fairfield's income earners had a weekly income of under \$300 per week in 2001, and the area had the lowest proportion of individuals earning greater than \$1,500 per week. We have some figures on the cost of housing in here somewhere. The minimum—

CHAIR—Is that comparable with or higher than Holroyd?

Mrs Fingland—I have found the figure now. The minimum weekly household income needed in June 2002 to purchase an affordable non-strata dwelling at the medium price range for Fairfield was \$1,283 and, for a strata title dwelling, \$670. The minimum weekly household income required to rent was \$733 for a non-strata dwelling and \$483 for a strata title dwelling. When you look at the difference between the incomes and the house prices, it is quite stark.

CHAIR—Senator Moore asked about availability. On page 4 of your submission you say:

Some insurance companies are not willing to issue insurance because of the perceived liabilities.

I have been wondering what you meant by that. Is that connected to housing?

Mrs Fingland—It is all to do with the negative media stereotyping of areas that the Holroyd representative was talking about earlier. Areas such as Cabramatta get such a bad reputation that many households in that area, irrespective of their circumstances, are seen by insurance companies as being uninsurable.

CHAIR—Is that for home and contents?

Mrs Fingland—For a whole range of things, I think.

CHAIR—Car insurance?

Mrs Fingland—Yes.

CHAIR—Going back to availability, what is the availability of private rental dwellings? Do you have any figures on that?

Mrs Fingland—I do know that in suburbs such as Cabramatta and Fairfield about 42 per cent of the housing stock is privately rented. In Fairfield as a whole only about eight per cent of our housing is Department of Housing stock. The rest of it—and we have 21 per cent of the rest of the housing stock—is actually rented from other sources. Very little of the new housing that is being built in the area, though, is low-cost rental. A lot of it is being financed through negative-gearing processes and things like that. We are very concerned that nobody is actually building low-cost housing for rent, and we have a huge waiting list.

CHAIR—I know we are a long way from Hobart, but when we were there we were told it was something like 95 per cent. There was virtually no private rental accommodation available in Hobart. Do you have any idea of what it would be in the Fairfield area? Is it 20 per cent that might be available—and this is a question to Holroyd as well—because that would no doubt affect the prices?

Ms Killian—I could not give you a percentage.

Mrs Fingland—I could not give you a percentage either—

Ms Killian—We can find out.

Mrs Fingland—but I do know that there is an issue in Fairfield and other parts of Western Sydney where small households that contain only one or two people are pushing up the price of private rental. Many of those households, whilst they have the ability to get on the first rung of the housing purchase ladder, are actually choosing not to do so. We think the reasons are partly to do with job insecurity and things like that. So small households are actually pushing out larger families—and particularly the larger, extended families that we have in areas like Fairfield—who are probably in greater need of that sort of accommodation.

Senator MOORE—Is it the same in Holroyd?

Ms Killian—Yes, I think so. The other thing is that the availability of private rental accommodation is very cyclical; it shifts enormously. We could try to come up with a figure. I am sure the Real Estate Institute or someone would be able to give us some figures.

Ms Jogia—I do not have any idea of a figure, but just from observation and from the amount of development in the area, particularly unit development, I think there is rental accommodation available. But again it is too expensive for a lot of people who are looking for accommodation. They just cannot afford the current rates.

Mr Prants—It has been passed on to me by the Western Sydney Tenants Service that their experience is that there is rental accommodation at the higher end of the rental market but not at the lower end of the rental market where most of their tenants are.

Ms Killian—Because a lot of the development that is happening is, for example, knocking down a fibro three-bedroom or two-bedroom cottage on a big block to make a dual occupancy, one side of which might be rented out, or build units where you are getting much more rent for them. That is the point.

Senator MOORE—You have given us statistics in the submissions, but I am interested in the communities. I want to know how many people are totally welfare dependent—that is, their only income is through the Centrelink system, the DVA system or one of those things. We have had evidence from a number of witnesses that there are people who are totally dependent in that way and there are people who are partially dependent. There are people who quantify their incomes differently and are not quite sure what their total income is because some comes from Centrelink, some comes from child support and some comes from something else. You have

given us stats, but do you have any idea of the number of people in your various localities who are totally welfare dependent?

Mrs Fingland—If I could respond on behalf of Fairfield, we have quite significant problems in being able to get data for our area. We find that there is severe under-enumeration of our population in the census, for example, because many of our community refused to fill in and return the census. That makes coming up with data very difficult in areas like Fairfield. We think part of the problem may be language, given that over half of our population come from non-English-speaking countries and the majority of them have poor English language speaking skills, but there is clearly another segment of our community who are actually very nervous about giving government—at any level—information. So we cannot be very confident that we have managed to examine the extent of the problem.

Senator MOORE—What about Holroyd?

Mr Prants—We have used an agency called WESTIR to collect a lot of our statistical data, and their holdings of Centrelink payments only go back to about three years ago. It has been very hard to get up-to-date Centrelink figures for welfare recipients. We could not get any updated figures.

Senator MOORE—So the data that you provided in your submission about various income levels may or may not be correct?

Mr Prants—The income levels came from the ABS 2001 census.

Senator MOORE—So that may or may not be right?

Mr Prants—Yes.

Senator MOORE—The other thing I want to ask about is your relationship with Centrelink and the involvement you as city council people working in the community have with Centrelink in the development of policy and service delivery mechanisms. Is that something that you are involved in, in regular consultation with the local officers—of whom there are quite a few sprinkled across your areas?

Mr Prants—Yes. Holroyd has the Merrylands Centrelink office.

Senator MOORE—It is a very large one.

Mr Prants—Yes. We work very closely with the social workers there, and that is about it. The social workers come to local interagency meetings and advise the local community groups of changes to policy, which are made nearly every day. They work very closely with neighbourhood centres as well as community aid, particularly in referring clients who might need extra help and support. And we report back to them on some of the issues that we have. One of those issues, which was recently discussed at a Holroyd interagency meeting, was about what happened to clients who were on Newstart allowances and were found to be in breach—did they lose their Commonwealth rental assistance as well? It came out that it depends on the percentage points of breach they get.

If they get an 80 per cent penalty then they still have some income and therefore do not lose their Commonwealth rental assistance. But if they get a 100 per cent breach then they lose all their entitlements, including Commonwealth rental assistance, which then affects their ability to stay in the private rental market. However, having said that, I know the local Centrelink office here has said that the social workers get together and case manage those clients—they now actually review them. They do not actually cut them off; they keep them going with payments and try to support them. So there is that sort of network happening, and it is only through that that issues are raised and we discuss them. Luckily, they have social workers who are concerned.

Senator MOORE—What about Fairfield? I do apologise for calling you like that, but it is just easier.

Mrs Fingland—In my position at Fairfield, I am not personally involved in any relationships with Centrelink at all, but I am sure that our human services people are. We have similar mechanisms.

CHAIR—In Melbourne, large councils have had successful partnership arrangements with community welfare and other groups in the provision of different services, such as neighbourhood centres et cetera. Do you have a similar partnership arrangement in your council areas?

Ms Jogle—In Holroyd we do not actually provide neighbourhood centre premises. We only have two neighbourhood centres, and they are in private premises and have funding for that rent, so that is okay. We provide four youth centre type premises, so I guess we are more involved in that respect. There are four youth services, running out of five buildings at the moment which are all council owned and supplied at peppercorn rental rates—nil income, basically—to council. We also have a number of community halls and community meeting rooms that are available to groups at very low rental rates, just to cover electricity and cleaning costs. That is the extent to which we get involved in providing premises for groups in Holroyd.

Ms Killian—As for other partnerships, we regularly have informal partnerships. If we are working in the networks, we will run information sessions, agency staff training, public forum planning and those kinds of things together, but it is on a more informal basis. I do not think we are familiar enough with the partnerships that you are talking about in Melbourne to be able to answer your question as well as you might like us to.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mrs Fingland—In Fairfield we work on a place management model. We have place managers involved in the hot spot areas of our LGA. We have a place manager for Cabramatta, for example, and for our employment areas and Bonnyrigg. We have a number of programs in place, one of which is in Cabramatta, in conjunction with the state government through the Premier's office. A lot of work has been done on developing programs to deal with drugs issues, crime and safety, problem gambling—there are a whole host of different programs associated with those sorts of things.

One of the things that we are also trying to get working in Cabramatta, in conjunction with the Department of Housing's community renewal team, is a program that looks at how to get some

sort of urban renewal of our three-storey walk-up flats. They are getting to the end of their lives and are pockets of social disadvantage. If we can learn some of the lessons that the Department of Housing have learnt through their community renewal efforts and then apply those to these areas of private housing, we think there may be some solutions there.

CHAIR—Thank you. Are there any other questions? For my out-of-state colleagues, do you know how many people WSROC represents in the council areas? Is it 1.3 million or something like that? Is it that high? There are probably more people there than there are in Western Australia.

Mrs Fingland—I should have the figure.

Mr Prants—Two million.

Senator MOORE—How many people are there in Fairfield? We have got the Holroyd figures.

CHAIR—I think you said 200,000, didn't you, Mr Lalich, and counting? In Fairfield, how many people do you think there are?

Mayor Lalich—Just under 200,000; 196,000 or somewhere there.

Mrs Fingland—There are 250,000 in Blacktown.

Mayor Lalich—Blacktown is the largest. There are about 260,000 in Blacktown.

CHAIR—I would like to thank you very much for appearing.

Proceedings suspended from 10.29 a.m. to 10.46 a.m.

BARTELS, Ms Ulrike Tobetha, Coordinator, Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre

HOFFMAN, Mr Nigel Ellis, Non-English-Speaking Background Youth Policy Officer, Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre

OWEN, Mr John, Community Project Officer, Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre

BOBIC, Ms Natasha, Community Project Officer, Canterbury-Bankstown Migrant Resource Centre

MOA, Ms Maketalena, Coordinator/Community Project Officer, Canterbury-Bankstown Migrant Resource Centre

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from the Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre and the Canterbury-Bankstown Migrant Resource Centre. Information on parliamentary privilege and the protection of witnesses and evidence has been provided to you. The committee prefers evidence to be heard in public, but evidence may also be taken in camera if such evidence is considered by you to be of a confidential nature. The committee has before it your submissions. I now invite you to make an opening presentation to be followed by questions from the committee.

Mr Hoffmann—Thank you for the opportunity to report to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee on behalf of the refugee and migrant population of Fairfield. The Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre provides settlement services to newly arrived immigrants and refugees to improve access to services, address special settlement needs and help develop skills and confidence. Our work also involves settlement projects in Liverpool and Macarthur, which is the Campbelltown area. All of our work, in the end, is about access: access to employment, housing, education, Centrelink, health services such as domestic violence services, and immigration advice. We work on improving access to mainstream services for our clients, and educate both the community and service providers about how to improve NESB access to these services.

It is very difficult for the newly arrived, especially those from refugee camps, to find out what services are available, let alone to learn what they are entitled to. We are working with the perspective that poverty is not just about income; it includes the availability of government services, cultural experiences and opportunities to improve socioeconomic status. Poverty is when living standards fall below an overall community standard and people are unable to participate fully in ordinary activities of society. We see poverty in Fairfield when services are not accessible and when there are not even services available to provide referrals to. Several perspectives assert that a lack of money is more a symptom of poverty than its cause. Commonly the poor are not without an income. What they lack is the ability to improve that income or benefit from it, a key factor in the creation of wealth and breaking the cycle of poverty.

It has been surprising to see the low representation of the non-English-speaking background community and the multicultural community in this inquiry. There have been few submissions from the multicultural community and only limited representation from migrant resource centres

such as us. On a variety of indicators, the migrant population are likely to experience financial hardship, but of course the working migrant poor are unlikely to write a submission to an inquiry such as this. We see through the local groups and service provider networks we are involved with that people in the multicultural community are afflicted by poverty primarily because they are marginalised in the complex structure of social security and employment in Australia. The strict requirements for eligibility of income support form the initial access barrier, then the activity test and determination of entitlements, are so difficult that many of our clients have simply disengaged. They have given up hope of receiving the public housing, employment assistance, medical care et cetera that they actually need.

I would like to develop this discussion on poverty as being part of a cause-and-effect chain, which does not adequately describe the way poverty works. There are competing debates at the moment about issues such as whether depression causes poverty or poverty causes depression and whether public housing leads to poverty or poverty causes people to move to public housing. It is not really possible to move forward through any of these arguments because poverty is both a cause and an effect. Financial hardship is an economic and social factor in many people's lives in Fairfield. While there have been attempts to address poverty in the community, these often only further entrench and consolidate the problem.

Poverty for the people of Fairfield is caused by lack of access to services, but living in financial hardship means they are not able to pay for many essential services. Poverty is not being able to provide for educational expenses, not being able to afford to use public transport, and waiting on any income from work or welfare payments to cover constant expenses. This pattern of interconnected social problems, exacerbated by financial hardship, is crucial to understanding poverty in Fairfield for the working poor, the underemployed and the unemployed.

A bit of background to Fairfield is that it has the highest refugee population in Sydney, partially due to the on-arrival accommodation for humanitarian entrants and the established multicultural community in the area. Fairfield also has a very high number of newly arrived migrants who often have limited capacities to support themselves until they become settled. Fairfield's residents have one of the lowest collective incomes in the country. This can be largely attributed to the high rates of unemployment and income support dependency, a considerable proportion of unskilled labourers, high incidence of outworkers and an overall low rate of upward social mobility.

In Fairfield, poverty is not just about income level and financial assistance; poverty is a lack of access to the resources that people need to participate in and maintain an acceptable standard of social and economic life. In our experience, the levels of income support paid to job seekers and other welfare recipients barely cover the basic costs of living. As a percentage, the number of clients attending our service on the basis of material poverty ranges between 30 and 45 per cent. These clients are often struggling to support families on social security payments. Income support has been misrepresented as a cause of poverty when in reality social security payments are the last resort people have to avoid poverty. The payments from Centrelink are well below what most Australians consider they need just to get by, let alone to face the difficulties faced by Fairfield's high proportion of refugees and newly arrived migrants. We argue that income support levels from Centrelink are being maintained below the poverty line as a backhanded

incentive against welfare dependency. This is further problematised by poor jobs growth and a rigorous and punitive mutual obligation system.

The strict requirements for eligibility for income support are a disincentive for the refugee and migrant community, especially for NESB young people who end up dropping right out of the welfare system if their youth allowance is breached. The number of people in this group accessing the reviews and grievances procedures is very low at Centrelink, despite almost half of the breaches being imposed on people under 25. The amount available on youth allowance is seen as not worth disputing and the complaints process as too difficult to access, so many young people in Fairfield have given up on income support and rely on family and friends to survive. Centrelink multicultural services also report very few referrals for young people despite the high unemployment rates and high rates of breaching of young people for noncompliance. The financial hardship caused by the disproportionate number of breaches imposed on youth allowance recipients and the resulting poverty is then compounded by the fact that in New South Wales travel concession eligibility is lost once a breach is imposed. Advance payments, leading to large outstanding debts, are also a well-documented trap of youth allowance, meaning that benefits are reduced over a long period to recoup a crisis payment.

Underemployment and casualisation in the Fairfield area are especially contributing to local poverty, with many employees not being able to work as much as they would like. The qualifications of skilled migrants are not being recognised without full-fee tertiary study upgrades. This is obviously restricting access to full employment. The federal government should be recognising the value of the migrant work force and supporting the recognition of overseas qualifications in Australia, but in Fairfield many highly qualified migrants are living in poverty and working only casually or part time in low-skilled occupations. In Fairfield there is not enough assistance for skilled migrants to find work and the government is not doing enough to assist in employment growth. Instead, we are seeing complex income support programs that require engagement with a range of departments or require specific compliance.

Centrelink has been trying to improve its procedures for the NESB community, with multicultural service officers and outreach officers, but they are still clearly struggling to deliver culturally appropriate welfare to Fairfield's multicultural population. We have more data on unemployment, and we will get to that. Poverty increases the systematic barriers to full participation in education and employment. However, the current welfare reforms look to be aimed at deterring welfare recipients rather than supporting them to overcome poverty. We feel that welfare reform is using the fear of poverty to motivate people to accept part-time, casual or contract placements that they are matched to or referred to by the Job Network.

Finally, income support is not employment and cannot provide the full social participation and economic independence that a secure job ensures. In Fairfield we need a coordinated effort from government to respond to structural unemployment that is causing major social consequences across our area. A vast number of Fairfield residents live in either overcrowded public housing or low-cost rental accommodation. The demand for priority housing for our area is around three years long and the queue for public housing is set at 15 years. A large number of the new arrivals to Fairfield are in fact newly arrived humanitarian entrants, many of whom are waiting for housing in emergency, temporary, overcrowded or inappropriate accommodation. Public housing has become a major stigma now for areas such as Cabramatta and acts as a deterrent to further development. With the changes in Department of Housing policy it has become much harder to

obtain priority housing, so tenants who have no private rental references are now struggling to find accommodation through real estate agents.

To conclude, I want to speak on poverty of influence. As a feature of mainstream society, both the formal structures of government and the culture of governance tend to exclude the poor from the decision making process. Government has an obligation to provide a system of government and a culture of governance that is participatory, inclusive and responsive to the needs of the population, as well as being efficient, transparent and accountable. In Fairfield, information is scarcely provided in mediums that are made relevant or accessible to the diverse population. These people generally lack access to information they can use to improve their livelihoods, whether it is with respect to the Internet, labour market, health care system or financial networks, legally or otherwise.

In Fairfield we are in need of socially and economically responsible education, training and employment policies that are tailored for a multicultural and multi-disadvantaged community. These policies should then be implemented in line with current and future skills needs of our population. It is difficult to find an example of a training program that has been truly developed in direct response to an identified need from our community. Rather, the programs that are heralded in our area are implemented from local and state government politicians as a means of coping with perceived social problems. There is a great difference between coping with and addressing social problems, and our community is just growing tired. Issues further relating to training, employment and poverty have been addressed in our submission to the Senate inquiry into current and future skills needs.

Fairfield needs vocational programs that are truly accessible to those most in need. Instead, we often hear about courses not being filled because they are not appropriately planned, promoted and implemented for our diverse population. There is clearly a large population in need of support in Fairfield, but it should not be the responsibility of community organisations to run English classes and unemployment programs. It is the role of federal government to develop and fund training programs, especially those that improve overall employability and workplace retention.

The unemployed and their advocates want to see the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations identifying current skills needs in areas where work is available and then putting in place real skills development programs in conjunction with state government agencies. We want to see the AMEP, the Adult Migrant English Program, becoming a more employment oriented English program, in addition to its current curriculum. The cost of English classes is much lower than the expense of paying for Newstart and then Intensive Assistance if migrants are still unemployed after the two-year wait. So we would like to see AMEP expanded to be available for any NESB community members who experience an English language barrier to employment.

Another point of embarrassment is that there is no new apprenticeship centre operating in Fairfield. It is incomprehensible that such a major national youth employment initiative could be put out of the reaches of a community in an area where it is needed the most. We know from our networks that employers generally hire trainees and apprentices more out of the availability of government supplements and incentives than for providing appropriate sustainable training opportunities. The incentives for employers need to be focused on completion of training

programs and not merely on short-term placements or publicly funded wage subsidies. Placements should also be targeted to young people who need them most and in industries where they provide the most advantages to young job seekers.

CHAIR—Mr Owen or Ms Bartels, would you like to add anything at this stage?

Ms Bartels—No, we think Nigel has done a fantastic job so far, so we are quite happy to take questions.

CHAIR—What about Ms Moa or Ms Bobic?

Ms Bobic—I will begin. The Canterbury-Bankstown Migrant Resource Centre is located in Campsie, New South Wales. We have the second highest population from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in New South Wales after Fairfield. We were first funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs in 1986, and since that time we have been quite instrumental in the development of a range of projects and initiatives in the Canterbury-Bankstown region. We are a community based organisation, and we provide direct services to migrants, refugees and humanitarian entrants. We network with local support services in the community and the government and private sectors to assist these people in meeting their settlement needs. The centre is run by a community management committee which is elected every year, and its membership is open to all who wish to join it. We also provide tenancy information and advice to private and public tenants in the southern Sydney local government areas.

We would like to focus particularly on two issues, the first one being access to services and especially access to employment. The second one will be looking at the two-year waiting period in regard to income support. I would briefly like to address the first issue. The experience of poverty and inequality in migrant and refugee communities is extensive, and the full nature of this experience is yet to be documented and researched. The issues of concern raised in the submission that we are going to present today are derived directly from the work that we have done in that area.

The extent to which migrants and refugees experience poverty and inequality derives from their experience of settlement in the Australian community. Factors such as English language proficiency, pre- and post-migration labour market experiences, obtaining recognition of overseas qualifications, access to adequate income support payments and accessing culturally appropriate support services all impact on successful settlement of migrants. In Australia, the ability to communicate in English is vital and it is directly associated with labour market success, accessing education and training opportunities, gaining information about services and finding secure and affordable housing. The extent to which migrants and refugees have access to English tuition will affect the level of poverty and inequality that they experience in Australia.

The initial settlement experience is crucial for a successful progress of adjustment and participation for migrants and refugees. The Canterbury-Bankstown Migrant Resource Centre has come across many cases where, even after three years of being in Australia, a considerable proportion of migrants still have very poor English skills. This raises the question of whether the 510 hours—or 600 hours that are offered in some cases—provided by the AMEP, the Adult Migrant English Program, is enough to overcome the barriers to poor language skills. Refugees

who arrived in Australia with a humanitarian visa were far more likely than other refugee groups to lack English language skills. Furthermore, other research has indicated that migrant and refugee women might experience even further disadvantage in accessing English language learning opportunities, due to their domestic and caring responsibilities and commitments at home. The inability to completely master the English language will therefore impact on every aspect of settlement for migrants and refugees and their experience with poverty and inequality. One of our first recommendations in regard to these issues was that further research should be undertaken to improve access to English language tuition for refugees with a humanitarian visa, with a specific focus on women.

Many recent arrivals, either through humanitarian entry or skilled migration, often find it difficult to find employment which is either in their skills of expertise or not poorly remunerated. Many first generation people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds experience lower socioeconomic status compared to non-CLDB people. This is often directly related to a range of barriers to well-paid employment which include poor English skills, lower educational opportunities and also limited cultural and social skills in the mainstream work culture. Unscrupulous employers often exploit migrants who are overseas qualified and highly skilled by underemploying them, and because of financial hardship most have no other options but to accept the job. Systematic discrimination, racism and stereotyping by potential employers—and, if employed, by fellow employees—in many industries does happen but it is often done covertly and is much more difficult to substantiate. In regard to this, our second recommendation was that statutory bodies, for example for engineering, medicine and architecture, should educate employers in these areas in order to raise awareness of the potential of employing overseas-qualified migrants.

Also, support services available to migrants and refugees play a key role in their successful settlement in Australia. Whilst settlement support services, such as migrant resource centres, are used quite frequently by migrants and refugees to help them look for work, with financial matters, in learning English, in finding housing and accommodation and accessing health services, there continues to be an ongoing struggle for adequate services for migrants and refugees. Community workers have noted that migrants and refugees continue to need settlement assistance after the initial period of two years, which is considered adequate by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. My colleague will discuss this in more detail later on. If migrants and refugees do not receive continued settlement assistance, it is likely that the poverty and the disadvantage which they experience will continue for generations to follow.

Cycles of poverty and social disadvantage can also continue for generations to come if the first generation of immigrants are not given successful and equitable opportunities to fully participate in every aspect of Australian life. In regard to these issues we have made two recommendations, the first one being that more thorough research should be conducted on the issue, to determine the length of time when settlement assistance is considered adequate. As I mentioned, my colleague will address this in more detail. The second recommendation is that more funding should be made available to settlement support services to meet the needs of refugees, migrants and humanitarian entrants, to facilitate their full participation in social and economic life in Australia.

Ms Moa—I am going to speak to the second part of our submission, about the effectiveness of income support payments in protecting individuals and households from poverty. The Social Security Legislation Amendment Act effectively removed the safety net for migrants who arrived or attained permanent residence after 4 March 1997. It introduced a two-year waiting period for all social security income support payments except the age pension, the sole parent pension, the disability support pension and family payment. The problems that people are experiencing are in some ways similar to those experienced by people with very low income, except that the severity is often much worse. There have been documented cases of the serious effects of the two-year waiting period on newly arrived migrants, including, for example, people suffering mental health problems consequent upon lack of nutrition because they have been unable to afford adequate food; poor housing and homelessness; exposure to work force exploitation, such as being forced to become an unpaid household servant in a relative's house; depressive illness; vulnerability, as these people frequently have no established support or information in the form of family and friends; loss of community contacts and family breakdown. In some cases, special benefit has been granted as a result of these problems—problems that arose only because of the initial failure to provide support. In other words, people are being forced into crisis before they receive assistance. On this issue, we recommend that the two-year waiting period be reconsidered, as it is a big, if not the biggest, barrier to the alleviation of poverty in Australia.

Most clients that present at our centre held a rosy but genuine view that they would obtain some kind of employment in Australia, even if not immediately in their usual fields, shortly after arrival. Some clients explained that they thought this because they had been selected for migration to Australia on the basis that they are skilled and also on the basis of information available in their country of origin regarding Australia. Subsequent to arrival in Australia the client was unable to find employment, and funds brought with them were quickly expended on the basic living expenses. The waiting period continues to seriously hamper the settlement process for many migrants who have been unable to find work and whose savings are not adequate to sustain them. The policy also places additional strain on extended family members, as well as on the services that provide support for low-income Australians.

We have found already that refugees who get the payment when they arrive are suffering, because they still need support when they present at the centre. They need different kinds of material support, like furniture, clothing and food vouchers and all that—basic needs—and they do get the payment when they arrive. People who arrive and have to wait the two-year waiting period have nowhere else to go. Refugees come to our centre and they need help with furniture, food vouchers, clothing and all the basic needs, and they already receive payment from Centrelink. People on the two-year waiting period who present at our centre also have these needs, but we cannot send them to the charities that we send the refugees to because these charities have already used up what they provide in giving them to the refugees.

So these people on the two-year waiting period, if they do not have friends or family who can help them, are left destitute and they have nothing. Sometimes they cannot afford food, clothing for their kids and things like that. So we have a recommendation for those who come and expect to find employment when they come here because they are chosen on their skills. Some mechanism should be put in place so that people entering Australia on skilled migration should be able to get assistance to find jobs in their field of expertise. Assessment of qualifications for eligibility for migration should be the same as for eligibility for employment. Whilst there are

currently some exemptions to the two-year waiting period, a central issue at present is access to special benefit. This payment is the last option for payment to people in hardship with no other means of support—

CHAIR—We already have your submission in front of us. In your own words, can you tell us—

Senator KNOWLES—If there is anything else you want to add.

Ms Moa—Yes. Basically, what we have is what has been put in the submission. We just want to reinforce that this group of people on the two-year waiting period includes some of the most needy clients that we get at the centre and we would like to see something done about the two-year waiting period to alleviate the hardships that they face. That is basically it.

CHAIR—Thank you very much. Senator Knowles, do you have some questions?

Senator KNOWLES—Thank you, Mr Chairman. I want to prefix my questions, so that you do not misunderstand where I am coming from, with the fact that I happen to be a supporter of migration, but clearly there are things that are a bit skew-whiff at the moment, to put it in Aussie lingo. One of those things, I think, through all my experience in dealing with migrant communities, is people's inability to speak English. So I put it to you: what are we doing wrong? Are we not placing a great enough emphasis on the ability to speak English before giving people the tick to migrate, knowing that, in a country like this, that is going to be a huge impediment to their material development as well as their personal development?

Mr Owen—When you say migration, do you mean skilled migration or do you mean humanitarian entrance or do you mean sponsored?

Senator KNOWLES—I mean skilled migration.

Mr Owen—I was just seeking clarification.

Ms Bartels—My understanding of the skilled migration program is that English language ability is one of the prerequisites.

Senator KNOWLES—Yes, it is.

Ms Bartels—That skill is something that we seek in Australia. I think that the migration program, over the last eight years, has been very much restructured towards people who have better English language levels and who bring in skills. The family migration program and the parenting program have dropped significantly in that period. With respect to the inability to speak English, as a blanket statement it is probably not a good thing to use. We have literacy and numeracy problems in our own community, in our English-speaking community, that we are trying to address through programs such as the LLNP. To learn an English language or any language at the age of over 30 or going on 40, as I am—I am only 40, Sue; I am not 50, as I look!—is very difficult.

When you come from a country that has a different alphabet, a different script and limited education and you have a refugee background, you are again limited. So I guess part of what we are saying in our paper, and I think what Canterbury-Bankstown are saying, is that the number of hours provided is inadequate—as they would be inadequate for someone of my education going to Iraq now, learning their language, becoming labour market competitive and understanding the system. It would take more than 510 hours for me to be equal to a resident there, to a native.

Senator KNOWLES—But that is what I am trying to say: regardless of whether we like it or not, there is an expectation among employers that people will be able to communicate with their clients and therefore we have to look at not just skilled migration. We have had evidence today that people coming under the skilled migration program are still having difficulties getting a job, and part of that problem is not just their qualification recognition but their ability to converse. Then we have the additional problem, and probably the somewhat more serious problem for an inquiry like this, of the family reunion program—of people coming here and not being able to speak English. That is compounded by the fact that people go to the AMEP, learn English, walk out, go back to their mother tongue and do not practise any of that English in the home environment. You are not going to be able to discipline people by saying, ‘Thou shalt not speak anything but English the moment you walk out of this door.’ We cannot do that.

Ms Bartels—With respect, Senator, I think you are making blanket statements. From the Migrant Resource Centre and the servicing perspective those issues are of concern, but it is a lot more complex than having people out there who do not speak English and who go home and just speak their own language. It is not as simple as that.

Senator KNOWLES—I am not saying it is; I am not suggesting it is.

Ms Bartels—There have been thousands and thousands of people in the migration stream and in the refugee stream over the past 50 years who have made huge contributions to the development of this country, whether they were language literate or not.

Senator KNOWLES—I agree with that.

Ms Bartels—For us to be looking at this as a cause, a symptom, rather than as a structural issue for governments is, I think, going in the wrong direction.

Senator KNOWLES—So what you are saying to me is that we should just throw money at this and that will solve the problem, that we should increase the number of AMEP hours and that will solve the problem? I am not trying to get an argument out of you. I am actually on your side. I do a lot of work with the migrant resource centres. I am not trying to make blanket statements. So try not to be hostile to the line of questioning that I am taking. I am trying to find solutions to the very serious problems confronting these people whom we try to help. I do not care what political party anyone is from. There are people in the parliament who genuinely try to help these people. I am not trying to be antagonistic; I am trying to be positive and find a way in which we can help these people. Ms Moa, do you want to add something?

Ms Moa—Yes. With regard to the clients—the migrants and refugees using the 600 hours or the 510 hours, and some of the refugees are given 610—a lot of them do not actually get to use those hours, because of different commitments. They attend the classes and halfway through

something comes up—either it is family commitments or they find a job. They need the money, so it is a choice of staying with the English class or getting some money. So they leave the classes and take up the job. Or if it is a woman it may be that there is a commitment to the children and things like that, so they cannot actually use up those 510 hours. Maybe there should be some flexibility with those hours. For example, maybe they could go to work and come back at some other time, with no limit on that, and try and use it up. Maybe it will help if they are working and they still attend the classes at some later time to upskill their English ability and things like that. If they just do 100 hours and they find a job and they go, there would still be those hours that they can use. It seems a waste—and you cannot transfer the rest of the hours to somebody else.

Senator KNOWLES—How do we also address the problem of more women being very seriously affected by a lack of English, which is compounded by their lack of participation in the community? These women may have a lack of communication at times even with their children who might be Australian born, because they really cannot get a handle on English. What do we do to solve that problem?

Ms Bartels—If I may respond—I will be less hostile, of course—in terms of solutions there are two. One you have mentioned as a possibility—that is, that there be greater emphasis on the English language before people arrive. Once they are here and if they are having English language difficulties, we suggest in our paper that there be greater intergovernmental cooperation in terms of the costs involved in bringing people, including women, up to an English language standard that allows them to participate fairly equally—or certainly to self-determine their own lives. We have Commonwealth-state agreements for a number of other things around health and so forth and my suggestion, and our recommendation in a skills paper that we have put together for another Senate inquiry—which we are happy to append here—is to cost share. There are different levels of English language, of course. There is a level for when you are getting around, catching a train and going to the shops, but when you go to the doctor or you see professionals there is a different level required, and when you compete in a labour market there might be a different level again, depending on your skills and your profession.

The suggestion that we make is that, basically, the answer is more investment in English language availability, and to be much more specific about what you are trying to achieve with a community that does not have a good level of English. One of the achievements is to make them labour market ready and labour market competitive. I think everybody agrees that if people are employed there is less dependency on the welfare system. It is better economically in every way, and socially. So if we can get people labour market competitive, there is a possibility of cost sharing there.

The assumption generally is that the department of immigration, because it is the agent that brings in people from other countries, is responsible for covering all the costs related to settlement. That is obviously not so, just as it is not so that the federal government alone should bear the costs. There should be much greater emphasis, I think, in interdepartmental and intergovernmental discussions on the costs of settlement—and not just on the costs but also on what settlement has given, and can give, to a state or country in terms of productivity and growth.

Mr Hoffmann—If I may repeat the point we made: the programs need to be accessible for those most in need. So if we are talking about migrant women who have a need to learn English, then we need to make sure that there are English classes that are truly accessible for women who have that need. We want programs to be in the area where people are most in need and tailored to their needs. So if this principle of access and accessible programs were taken right through the federal, state and local governments, we would not really have such a problem with this.

Ms Bobic—In addition to that, you mentioned a range of women, including women with children who are at school and speak English. But there is also that other level of women who have small children and need child care. It is just a basic issue that I want to add to what Nigel mentioned, because I think some of the proposed changes, especially to the way the ACL's AMEPs are run, basically include cutting down on child care, and I think that will exclude even more women. Instead of going that way, perhaps we should be going the other way and actually providing more. Some of the statistics that look at the Canterbury ACL suggest that nearly 40 per cent of all migrants, refugees and humanitarian entrants who use their English language classes actually also take the access to child care. So the percentage of those people is quite high. If that is cut down and if it is tendered out, which is one of the proposals, there will be even fewer women who will be able to do that.

Senator KNOWLES—What about the availability of interpreter services? It always worries me when NESB people have to use their children, particularly for medical diagnoses and things like that. It just frightens the living daylight out of me. What is the availability of interpreter services in this area?

Mr Hoffmann—I will just make a point. My main project is working with youth services between Fairfield, Liverpool and Campbelltown. We have a lot of concern about the use of interpreters. People will ask, 'Do you need an interpreter?' rather than, 'Are you comfortable speaking in English?' There is a big difference in the reaction you get from either of those. The police are not using interpreters enough. Schools are not using interpreters enough. In health care, they still ask, 'Do you need an interpreter?' People will say, 'No,' and then they will make a decision they are not fully aware of, or they will give some information they are not fully aware of. It is a constant concern. Unfortunately, though, NESB issues just get stuck on interpreting, and really interpreting is only one-tenth of the access barrier that is involved.

Senator KNOWLES—It is still a crucial part at crucial times that one cannot ignore and just say, 'You should be learning more English and you should be able to do it now.' Given that they cannot do it now, there needs to be a fall back position, doesn't there?

Mr Owen—We have been doing some work with some of the settlement service providers in the Fairfield area, and the interpreting issue has come up quite a lot. We have had a lot of client feedback through those groups that, on interacting with services like those that Nigel has mentioned, interpreting services were not made available to them. We have made several inquiries into why this has been the case. The common response has been that the relevant departments have not had adequate allocations of moneys for the purposes of interpreting and translation. At a local and regional level these organisations or agencies are forced to use ad hoc measures like children or bilingual staff, whether or not they are NAATI qualified.

Mr Hoffmann—The police say that it is too expensive to use TIS, the telephone interpreting service. That is not good enough. In all the publicity about what they are doing in Cabramatta and Fairfield they are saying that they are providing culturally appropriate services, but then we hear from the youth officers that they are not using interpreters because it is too expensive. The cost of not using interpreters is much more expensive than the cost of the phone call.

Ms Bobic—In addition to that, it is not just about government services and services such as police but also about other community services that are more mainstream—for example, services that work with adolescents and young people. One of the issues is that, whilst part of their internal policy is to provide access to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, there is very little practical guidance as to how to do that. Part of the money should be allocated to that. That is one of the problems. Another issue that was not mentioned is that with small and emerging communities, communities that are very small, there are interpreters, but the problem with using them is that people know them through their community. If there is a sensitive issue—for example, an issue of domestic violence or child abuse—people who require interpreters often know the interpreters through their community. That is another problem.

Senator KNOWLES—How do you overcome that?

Ms Bobic—It is very difficult.

Senator KNOWLES—Call another NAATI interpreter from Victoria or something? In practical terms, how do you solve that problem?

Mr Owen—Because the communities are small and recently arrived, quite often their interpreters do not have appropriate qualifications and are hence not bound by the same mandates or legislative requirements.

Senator KNOWLES—The issues of confidentiality and everything else.

Mr Owen—Or code of conduct.

Senator KNOWLES—How do we solve that?

Ms Moa—A problem as well is that a lot of the minority groups are small and they do not have interpreters from those specific communities because they are too small—the numbers are too small to be counted. In terms of a lot of interpreting and translation services, most government departments or community agencies take the four largest groups and everything is in those languages. The small ones just get missed out all the time. We keep trying to get them to include the smaller groups. Because the older groups have been here for years they have a lot of support and they probably know more by now. We try to get in some of the smaller countries which have smaller numbers but the needs are there—they need to have interpreters and translations.

Mr Hoffmann—Possibly we could promote interpreting as a career a lot more instead of seeing youths who speak another language as having this really big barrier to employment. Most young people we are dealing with speak English well and also have this resource of speaking another language at home. It is possible as well to spread the funding between different

departments to cover the cost of TIS, which at the moment is just within DIMIA, and we could see interpreting becoming one of the leading careers in a multicultural country instead of something that is a constant problem.

Senator KNOWLES—Making it an asset instead of a negative.

Ms Bartels—That is right. In the enterprising world, call centres are becoming increasingly important to larger companies. When you have another language it is an incredible asset. We are working on that in Fairfield to try to make that an employable asset—to try to have a major call centre in Fairfield using all the languages that we have. An interpreting career can be a career in the business enterprise sense as well as in the public service sense.

Senator KNOWLES—Mr Hoffmann, you talked about the training programs being offered—these are my words not yours—not being in touch with requirements. How would you suggest that training programs become more geared towards current requirements and problems?

Mr Hoffmann—Initially it is about consultation. It is about listening to what kinds of careers the local young people want.

Senator KNOWLES—Or are available.

Mr Hoffmann—Initially I would say it is listening to what the young people want. If young people in Fairfield are aspiring to go to university and work in multimedia then the local TAFE should not just be offering industrial courses like they are at the moment. There is a big push with training to try to educate the multicultural community about the advantages of being in manufacturing, to show that blue-collar work is not all dirty and that you can earn some really good money. But we find that the community expectation is for the young people not to go into manufacturing. They really want the young people to move ahead of where their parents have been. The community expectation does not factor in economically, but it means that young people are actively discouraged from going to TAFE or from taking up some of the training opportunities that are right there. There have not been any education or career consultations in recent times, and possibly we could see some more appropriate training courses if the expectations of the community were listened to more.

Senator KNOWLES—I understand where you are coming from with all of that, but what people want and what is available as a job can be two entirely different things. We could crank up 150 multimedia graduates tomorrow and then say, ‘Go and get a job,’ but around here there might be a requirement for plumbers, electricians, bus drivers or so on, and they will get good employment, ultimately run their own companies and so forth. There obviously needs to be a balance. If they do not want to be doing that sort of work then there has to be something else available. But there has to be a balance. Let us not crank up a whole lot of people who are not going to be able to get a job so we will get the best qualified unemployed group of people we can possibly have.

Mr Owen—I agree with you on that: there does need to be a balance. We happen to have a fairly good idea in the Fairfield area of what job vacancies exist. We also happen to have a fairly good idea of what types of industry clusters we have in our area, and what types of employment preferences those industry clusters have. Where the balance is really out of kilter is that we do

not have a clear picture of the types of skills or employment experiences of the labour supply. In terms of labour demand, industry are constantly telling us what they are after, and council does a good job of finding out what their needs are. But in terms of labour supply we do not have a clue, and that certainly is a gross imbalance.

Senator KNOWLES—Is enough being done in the schools to destigmatise trades? To put that another way: is too high an expectation raised at schools—where people think that, ‘If I choose to and really want to be a tradesman, I am going to be frowned upon,’ as was a young chap I spoke to last year? He was almost embarrassed to say that he was going to do a plumbing apprenticeship. I said, ‘That’s fantastic; what do you mean?’ He said, ‘Well, it doesn’t mean that I’m going to be a university graduate of anything else.’ I said, ‘There are lots of unemployed university graduates out there, but there are lots of people amongst those university graduates who need a plumber.’

Ms Bartels—I am part of the regional GROW board, as well as the Fairfield local GROW, which is interested in generating employment and economic opportunities across regions and local government areas. In Fairfield there is a careers links project, which we have talked about. The student population has a huge expectation that it will go into IT. IT is the big thing. I am sure you have come across that. The project is looking at where that expectation is coming from. Is it coming from their own peer group, from their parents or from teachers? The project is trying to balance the two—to redirect some of that ambition into trades and, at the same time, also look for opportunities in IT for work experience placement and so forth. So it is a combination of the two, and I think everybody that has spoken so far is right: there is not an interest in taking up trades, to some degree, and we need to work at the community level to develop that interest again. A plumber can make more than someone in IT—I would be a plumber! We need to make it clearer to young people that that is a true career option, and a good option.

Mr Owen—I would like to make one further point on that. We are talking about communities that have lived through enormous and intense periods of instability. Often parents see their struggle for viability as citizens in this country through their children, and trades—as good as they can be—are often the most volatile area. When there is an economic upturn, tradespeople tend to do very well; but when there is a downturn in the building industries or whatever, tradespeople tend to suffer somewhat. So if there is any point of discouragement, I think it is not only in terms of that struggle for viability but also in terms of wanting a sense of stability for their children and for themselves.

CHAIR—We heard from the Smith Family yesterday and they made the point that for one of their programs, Learning for Life, the family background was more important than the school. I am sure that, from observations of parts of south-western Sydney, there must be in the schools a conflict between children. In your submission you say that there is school attrition—sometimes short and sometimes long—but that there is also a lot of motivation from children to be the next generation of doctors and all that. In your submission on Fairfield, in the second line of the second paragraph, you say:

Many families experiencing homelessness are effectively forced to live in illegal and informal settlements because they cannot access the private housing market.

Can you explain what you mean there, please?

Mr Owen—Squatting. There are several places. In fact, Open Family, a charity based in Cabramatta, deal a lot with transitory housing. They regularly take people around and show politicians and other state bureaucrats the illegal squats in the area. There are plenty of squats in abandoned housing, burnt out housing, places behind shops et cetera.

CHAIR—In your opinion, are these used by the recently arrived migrants or long-term migrants, or is it more general? Are there any observations you can make?

Mr Owen—The general observation is that these are places of last resort. We find that—in terms of employment, housing or any of those things—the burden is generally carried by the community first and foremost. So obviously living in overcrowded circumstances would be preferable to living in a squat, but it certainly does happen.

CHAIR—Are these people working, to your knowledge? Are some or any of them working?

Mr Owen—We do not generally work a lot with this type of group, but through our networks and through anecdotal evidence we have come across them.

CHAIR—You said that Cabramatta Centrelink has one of the highest rates of breaches in the state. What have you done, if you can do anything, to try to reduce that amount of breaching? You said that breaching occurs for a variety of reasons. It is not necessarily that they are not turning up to the job; it is that they cannot, or there may be language difficulties.

Ms Bartels—One of the questions asked earlier of the local government representatives was how they worked with Centrelink. We have an extremely close working relationship with Centrelink, and I am sure our colleagues in Canterbury-Bankstown do as well. We have Centrelink offices in Fairfield and Cabramatta that we work with. When their levels of breaching became known through networks, and Centrelink multicultural officers made it known, we worked on how to best educate the community to prevent it. So we ran information sessions. There was also a federal government inquiry into that which looked at restructuring the way Centrelink notifies and organises interviews. One of the adjustments has been that people at least now have one sentence in their own language that is very clear.

CHAIR—This is providing they can read their own language.

Ms Bartels—There is always that problem as well, but you certainly reach a whole lot more people. So it is clearly understood that if they do not attend an interview then something will happen to their benefit. That has been helpful, because in the past they were notified only in English. There is a national pilot at the moment, I think, that is monitoring the changes that Centrelink are instituting and having a look at whether those are working. John, do you want to add to that?

Mr Owen—Yes. We have put quite a lot of pressure on Centrelink in this field. One of the things that we were involved in initially was looking at a regional pilot where Centrelink outreached to community centres to try and bridge some of the accessibility barriers. Over time that outreach idea of servicing young people in their own environments has become a national pilot. This has seen a huge downturn in the number of breaches. At one stage when this all became public, we saw that Fairfield in the reporting period, which I think was six months, was

seeing something like 1,000 breaches, which was well above the national average. I believe it was not just the highest in the state but the highest in the country.

CHAIR—I have a question to ask Canterbury-Bankstown witnesses. Page 2 of your submission says:

Unscrupulous employers often exploit migrants who are overseas qualified and highly skilled by under-employing them ...

Would you like to give some examples of that? You also say, in recommendation 6:

A satisfactory solution must involve more examination of the capacity of the sponsor to provide for all the various relatives in question.

You said that people are working as unpaid servants in their relatives' homes. I wonder if you would like to expand on that reference to 'unscrupulous employers' and then that comment about people who are unpaid servants in their relatives' homes.

Ms Moa—In relation to the two-year waiting period, some of our clients come to us because they have no money, no support. They live with families or relatives and they do a lot of work for them, but they are not getting paid for that. Their payment is their accommodation, food and things like that. They do a lot of jobs for their family, but they do not get any money.

CHAIR—Would they work for unscrupulous employers as well? Do they work in factories as well or in textile and clothing industries?

Ms Moa—No. They cannot get employment. They do not have anything, so they rely on relatives or family and work for them. They do whatever they are told.

CHAIR—Are there two groups? One group works for unscrupulous employers and another group gets exploited by their families because they are not eligible for any assistance for two years. Is that what you are saying?

Ms Moa—Yes. There is a group that does not access work at all, that cannot get work, and they depend entirely on their relatives.

Ms Bobic—Just adding to that, I think people in both of those groups are exploited in many cases because of their lack of English skills. So when we talk about unscrupulous employers and migrants who qualified overseas, we are talking about migrants who are quite highly qualified in their own country and either have been unable to have their qualifications recognised here or need to—

Ms Moa—Retrain.

Ms Bobic—That is right, and they are unable to do that. Because of financial hardship, they will get into companies and into jobs where employers will exploit them in the sense that they will offer them positions that are actually a lot lower than what they are qualified for, which means that they are also badly paid. Therefore, because they are working really long hours, they

are unable to go out and improve their English in any other sense. Sometimes unscrupulous employers can also be linked to family in that, because migrants and refugees have poor language skills, they will sometimes get work with employers from their own community because they speak the language. And these employers will also exploit them in the sense that they know they cannot go out and look for other work because they do not have the language skills.

CHAIR—Recommendation 6 says:

A satisfactory solution must involve more examination of the capacity of the sponsor to provide for all the various relatives in question.

Does that mean that the sponsor cannot really look after all the relatives that he or she is bringing into Australia?

Ms Moa—Some sponsors do bring relatives over and then at any time just say, ‘We won’t help you anymore,’ and they are left with nothing. The sponsors can just say, ‘We don’t want anything to do with you. You do whatever you want.’ There is nothing to say that the sponsor must actually look after them for so many years. There is nothing to enforce that—that they are liable or there is a legal implication or anything like that. So you can sponsor somebody and just leave them like that, without having anything to do with them.

CHAIR—One alternative might be not to allow sponsors to sponsor so many people, which might be causing a grave difficulty.

Ms Bobic—Alternatively, you could try to ensure that sponsors do not renege on their commitment.

Ms Moa—Yes, not to go back on what they have already said—that is, ‘We’ll look after them.’

Ms Bobic—And we need to educate sponsors to make it really specific as to what their responsibilities are, once they have sponsored someone, and to make that really specific in a practical sense. We need to say to them that, for this period of time, you will have to do such and such so that, by signing the sponsorship form, they are also committing to that. That is left sometimes; it is just assumed and not made in writing.

Ms Bartels—Just to add to that, that is a good idea but there are of course life changes. For instance, a family that is quite well off—they have a nice big house and have good jobs—can sponsor members of their family to come and live with them. Then, when the sponsored people arrive, big things happen. Somebody gets sick in the family—maybe through heart disease—or they lose their job, and of course those changes have an impact on both the sponsor and the people that are sponsored. That needs to be considered in an environment where the government may tighten the rules about sponsorship and the sponsor’s commitment to the people they bring in.

CHAIR—Does anyone have anything else to say before we finish this session?

Mr Owen—I would like to expand on a figure that was presented in our paper. I refer to the second paragraph on page 1 of the submission, where we talk about the unemployment levels in the employment service area of Fairfield-Liverpool. I would just like to add to a point that was made by the representative from Fairfield City Council—that is, the data collection does not allow us to do a lot and actually hides quite a lot as well. According to census data—I have got some notes here and I will refer to those—the total area has a total population of close to 340,000. The total number of persons of working age is approximately 205,000. Both councils have often given indications of a 30 per cent unemployment rate in many of the suburbs. This is in stark contrast to the official unemployment rate, which I believe for Fairfield hovers around nine per cent. We tend to look more towards the welfare dependency rates rather than that nine per cent. For example, Fairfield has more than 60,000 recipients on welfare and Liverpool has 59,000-odd. That is a total of about 121,000 on welfare.

Of course, not all people on welfare are going to be looking for work, but it is certainly not just confined to people on Newstart allowance. If we deduct people on age pension, family tax benefit, Youth Allowance, Austudy, widow pension and the double orphan pension—people obviously on all of these would not be working—we are still left with about 73,000. That is far outside a nine per cent unemployment rate. Again, this does not include persons who are subject to a two-year wait and people who are not registered as receiving a payment. So the two-year wait aside, we are still talking about 36 per cent of the total working age population. So it is not difficult for us at all to sustain this figure of 60,000. As a result, thousands—those on disability support pensions and other payment types that do not require people to look for work—are hidden from participation rates. Our figure is inclusive of persons not employed who are in receipt of a payment but not required to work. So that includes carers, mature age workers, single mothers and people receiving allowances for their children—people who, for one reason or another, are not engaged in the labour market and are hence dependent on welfare payments.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Owen, Ms Bartels, Mr Hoffmann, Ms Moa, and Ms Bobic.

Ms Bartels—We thank you for the opportunity to appear here today and congratulate you on conducting the inquiry in the first place. We hope it reaches some good conclusions.

CHAIR—Thank you.

[11.56 a.m.]

BURJI, Mr A., (Private capacity)

COOPER, Mr Brian, (Private capacity)

KARCZ, Ms Joanne, (Private capacity)

LAUGHTON, Mr Bob, (Private capacity)

SHARPE, Ms Janice, Holroyd Community Aid and Information Service

CHAIR—This is a time set aside by the committee as a public forum. A number of ladies and gentlemen who have come along today have expressed an interest in making a statement to the committee. I welcome you all and thank you very much for coming along here today. I now invite you each to make a brief statement.

Ms Karcz—I am here in my own capacity, although I am a volunteer at the House of Welcome, which was mentioned by the Holroyd City Council this morning as a community resource. My concern is for those people who are released from detention on bridging visas. Some of these people are released into the community with no support whatsoever. They do not qualify for any special benefits and they are not allowed to work. This means that they have no income whatsoever. My recommendation, which at a minimum has no financial implications, is that all people on bridging visas are at the very least allowed to work until they are either repatriated or their situation changes.

Mr Cooper—I work for an agency that provides data to various community agencies in Western Sydney. My concern is that, in the area of poverty, buying or getting data from the Commonwealth in a form which is useful to those groups is often very difficult. Often policy requirements restrict Centrelink information so we cannot get adequate information from Centrelink at an affordable price. If we want to get information from, say, the ABS to assist community groups, it costs several thousand dollars. We bought a set of tables from the ABS, with statistics by country of birth, by language spoken and by age for the top 80 languages spoken, and it cost us over \$8,000. If we wanted to get the same tables by, let us say, occupation, income and education, we would be talking about almost \$100,000—just to get a good set of tables together which would be of use to community agencies which could then advocate for the client group. If we are to attack poverty, we need good information which is affordable and accessible, because planning systems do not work without good quality data. That is about all I have to say.

Ms Sharpe—I am the welfare coordinator of Holroyd Community Aid and Information Service here in Merrylands. I want to bring to the attention of the committee the emerging trend that I have noticed over the last few years since 1996, from the stats that I have collected, which is that single people of all the different marginalised groups are starting to be a bit neglected. These people may include the aged, single men and women from a non-English-speaking background, single men and women suffering mental illness, single men and women suffering

from drug addiction, single men and women who have left jail recently, the homeless, young people and the disabled. Some may have a dual diagnosis as well.

The increase is steady, but in 1996-97 the number of young single people was 913, in 1997-98 it was 1,006, and in the last annual report we had 1,137 singles. I have put down in my submission a couple of the reasons why I feel that is so. It is because some major ER organisations have changed their focus to families and because some volunteers in some organisations are untrained and unable to handle some clients with some of these problems, especially mental illness and drug addiction. My recommendations include a review of Centrelink payments to these people, considering breaching and mutual obligation. Centrelink does not have enough personal support advisers for these people. We work very closely with Centrelink here in Merrylands. The manager of Centrelink at Merrylands is actually on our management committee. That is about all I have to say today.

Mr Laughton—I am from Australia at Work. Australia at Work is a not-for-profit organisation which was set up to create a cooperative approach to these problems that we have been speaking about today. I do not have any problems to talk about; I have solutions. The solutions are to create housing and jobs. We measure the success of our organisation by how many jobs we create. It is no good giving a person a job if he does not have somewhere to live. It is no good giving them somewhere to live if they do not have a job. So we have developed a system. I am from the bush, and the reason I am in Sydney today is that I came here to speak to the Minister for Housing yesterday to promote where we are going.

The only thing we are asking for is a help up, not a handout. We want our programs to cost the community no more than what they are currently paying, and, in the long run, for the people involved to pay back the community as they come off welfare. I am a committed socialist, but I do not believe in the welfare state. It is abhorrent to me. It takes away people's pride. It takes away our ability to think straight. I have always been poor, but I have never lived in poverty. I have never seen poverty like the last 20 years. It astounds me that a country with so much, and so much to do, can have so many people unemployed. We have to rethink where we are going. We cannot leave it to others. We have to do it. I am not asking any governments or anything to help us. The three of us that run this organisation have put in half a million dollars of our own money, so we are fair dinkum about it—it is not something that we have dreamed up—and we have been promoting this over the country for the last 13 years.

The problem is getting people to listen to our serious objectives and where we are going. We have worked out that if we build 500 houses, which we can rent out through the system for 15 years, it will give us \$75 million to put back into employment and housing. That would cost the government the same as what they are paying now, because they are paying housing assistance to people who have not got jobs, and they have to pay that until we get those people out of this thing they are caught up in now by not having jobs. We want people to look after themselves, not to have governments look after them. In the Bulahdelah Working Village Project, which I just happen to be the chairman of—that is where I come from—we have identified that in the first year we will create \$16 million in surplus. We will create 45 jobs in the short term and it will expand. It will be replicable anywhere in this country or overseas.

I have travelled overseas and looked at the Mondragon system in Spain, where an old priest and five out-of-work graduates developed a thing called the Mondragon Cooperative System.

When I was there, from 1994 to 1996, they created 63,000 jobs. Their income in 1994 was \$US6 billion. Now they have their own universities and their own hospitals, which are owned by these people who were disenfranchised by the Falange government because they were the Basques on the Left side and so on. But no matter—they did it and it is achievable. We are as smart as them, at least, and we see that as a model which the country should be having a serious look at.

There was also a group in Milwaukee, which started in the 1930s, when they saw the need for kids to have some protein—some milk and what have you. They started delivering milk home to home, and as soon as the private industry saw it they said, ‘This is a good thing; we will go and do that,’ and pushed them out of the road. Then they developed optical prescription manufacturing, which was very successful and OPS came out and knocked them out again. In 1994 they had created 4,000 houses in the north of America, across into California. Four thousand houses is a pretty good objective. In this state we have a shortage of 250,000 houses right now. Not yesterday, not tomorrow, but now, 250,000 people are waiting on the housing list and cannot get a house. We are saying we can make this happen.

When I was in Darwin after the cyclone—I was an engineer helping them with rectification after the cyclone—we had a need for a house and so I developed a house which was cheap to make. The ones I made there were made out of scraps. I have developed that now and we tested it in Comalco’s wind tunnel. We have got engineers’ certificates for it and it is a goer. It is a three-bedroom house and we can build it in this state for around about \$30,000. In a community based operation, where we come back to the idea of the common good—which is what Australia was built on—we believe that we can make a difference by creating jobs. We cannot use the same model for every town. I have travelled the country and I see the differences. But there is always the same problem—and we have different solutions. We are not saying to anybody, ‘Use our solution.’ We are saying, ‘If you want us to, we will help you.’ We are not pushing ourselves anywhere. If you want to do this, we will help you. There are solutions and we must at least look at them. If we do not, it is at our own peril.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Laughton.

Mr Burji—I have been unemployed for 1½ years now. During that time I have made a frantic search for work, which is not there. My concerns are about those people who are currently unemployed—which is about three-quarters of a million people in this country—who have no jobs to go to, and about their welfare payments. We have people in parliament who are making laws for us. Our benefits as unemployed people are about \$25 a day, and yet the politicians who are in power award themselves \$330 a day. Why is there so much inequality in terms of the benefits which are paid to the politicians? We are not out of work because we do not want to work. There are no jobs to go to. Why is that inequality there?

The other thing that concerns me is we have the Prime Minister living in two residences at the moment, which is costing the taxpayers \$1.4 million a year. What is achieved by keeping him in that status, like a peacock? We have the Governor-General living like a peacock as well. What do we achieve by keeping those people in that opulent lifestyle? After all, they are ordinary people like anybody else. If the government cannot afford to feed the unemployed people, who are on the scrap heap—not because they prefer to be there but because the system has created such an environment—why isn’t the same thing being applied to people in those positions of power? That is my concern. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you. Ms Sharpe, what are ER agencies?

Ms Sharpe—Emergency relief agencies.

CHAIR—Right.

Mr Cooper—The Commonwealth used to collect information on emergency relief several years ago and has since discontinued that collection. It was a nationwide collection. It was the best information we had on material poverty in Australia. The Commonwealth, in its wisdom, decided to discontinue that collection. I understand from the Australian Council of Social Service that all ER agencies in all states were required to participate in it. It would be useful to have that collection or a similar type of national collection reinstated. Then we could have a good idea of the extent of ER, why it is out there, and the impact it has on the community. If the committee could recommend that, it would be very useful in terms of those dealing with poverty at the federal, state, and local levels.

CHAIR—Thank you very much, Mr Cooper.

[12.12 p.m.]

CRAIG, Ms Jenny, St Vincent de Paul

DOBSON, Mr Vince, St Vincent de Paul

HARRIGAN, Mr P., St Vincent de Paul

POWER, Mr Paul, St Vincent de Paul

STONE, Mr J., St Vincent de Paul

TIPPER, Ms M., St Vincent de Paul

CHAIR—I welcome representatives from St Vincent de Paul. I invite you each to make a brief statement.

Ms Tipper—I am the executive officer of the St Vincent de Paul Society for the diocese of Parramatta. I should also declare other interests in relation to some of the previous speakers. I sit on the board of WESTIR, the agency of which Mr Cooper spoke, and fully support his statements about the data access and costs. I have also been a long-time resident in this area and have worked with Holroyd Community Aid. I also sit on some diocese of Parramatta panels, on the board of Ministry to Solo Parents and their Families, and on the Centacare board.

One of the things I should say after Ms Sharpe's statement is that a lot of the data that were collected and came through their service were also reflected locally in the service here. The diocese of Parramatta extends from Ermington to Mount Victoria, from Luddenham down to Guildford and back up to what is really lower Cessnock—although of course there is not the population. So I think we are talking about one of the most populous locations in Australia.

CHAIR—Ms Tipper, are going to make the major statement for the group?

Ms Tipper—No. I have just about finished. All I am going to say is that the society nationally has submitted a paper. We fully support the principles in that. The paper mainly expresses issues about equality and lack of opportunity. In previous meetings I have had with different federal government people—ministers et cetera—the things that we have identified as issues are: access to living skills knowledge and education, particularly in terms of literacy; mental illness, which has a very profound effect on the services in this area; drugs; and assistance with breaching. We would like to see a long-term cooperative approach to outcomes, because we think that, with changes in successive governments, we have had long-term development of problems and community issues and we need to develop those into long-term unified approaches. Thank you for the opportunity to speak.

CHAIR—Thank you.

Mr Stone—I am from St Vincent de Paul at Rutherglen, out in the Mount Druitt area. I particularly want to address the issues of mental health. Out in that area the majority of our clients, up to about 78 per cent, suffer from mental illness of one degree or another. Last Monday week we had a young man walk in who was 19 years of age. He had walked out of a psychiatric hospital in northern New South Wales and found himself down in the Sydney region. When we tried to get help and care for him we were told by Blacktown Mental Health Services that at that time they could not do anything as it was their lunch break and that it was because of a shortage of staff in that area. Later we took the young gentleman to Mt Druitt Hospital. He was later admitted to Cumberland and returned to northern New South Wales. This shows a problem in both the federal and state spheres, in that the mentally ill are not being looked after. They are also the majority of the homeless in the Mount Druitt area, suffering from various psychoses—schizophrenia, bipolar disorder et cetera. Governments should not abrogate their authority but should help these people, the most vulnerable in our society. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Stone.

Ms Craig—I work for St Vincent de Paul Society in the Macarthur Ozanam Centre in the Campbelltown area. The centre is actually our homeless persons facility, with 10 programs under that umbrella. My statement is about the changing face of homelessness that we work with on a day-to-day basis through our 10 services in Campbelltown. Homelessness is no longer old men on a park bench. Homelessness has changed dramatically, and we deal with anybody. At the moment in our facility we have people from a four-day-old baby right up to a woman who turns 83 tomorrow and for whom we have organised a party. We would like to get across to you the different reasons for homelessness, so I have submitted a paper on how poverty and homelessness affect people. We work with different groups of people who have different reasons for becoming homeless, and I want to share this with you.

CHAIR—Which paper is that, Ms Craig?

Ms Craig—It is on poverty and homelessness and it is by the St Vincent de Paul. We have tabled it.

CHAIR—We have not got it yet but the secretary has.

Ms Craig—I would like to share the case study of a middle-class woman with a background in nursing who has just come to our services with a history of domestic violence for the past five years. She has stayed in the relationship through the fear of poverty, through the fear of having to leave with no income and through the fear of taking her children out of private education. So the fear of poverty can also keep people in dangerous relationships. We also have an 82-year-old ex-serviceman who was receiving a full TPI pension and had nowhere to go when he was widowed, other than to his step-daughter's house, where he was a victim of elder abuse. So there is a great range of homeless people and homelessness should no longer be perceived as a man on a park bench. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you, Ms Craig.

Mr Power—I represent the Wollongong diocese and council of the St Vincent de Paul Society, our organisation overseas, and the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society from

Glenfield, just south of Liverpool, down to Ulladulla on the South Coast. We have actually written to the committee requesting a hearing in the Wollongong area and we would be keen for you to agree to that, because there are a lot of issues—

CHAIR—We do have an intention to go there.

Mr Power—That is great. That is good news. One thing which came to light yesterday was the latest ABS statistics on unemployment, which showed that once again Wollongong and Shoalhaven cities have amongst the highest unemployment rates in New South Wales. That has been the case for perhaps 20 years or more. We are seeing—as is the St Vincent de Paul Society generally—no real decline in the number of people seeking emergency assistance from us, despite some of the positive economic indicators that are around. It is quite clear to us that people on the lowest incomes are really being bypassed by the economic growth that is occurring and by employment opportunities. It is also fairly clear that employment programs for the unemployed give the least amount of assistance to the most disadvantaged unemployed people. That is an issue that we are really keen to put before the committee.

I also want to make some quick comments about the affordability of housing for people on low and lower-middle incomes. As you are aware, the situation of real estate prices in Sydney means that Australians on the lowest 40 per cent of incomes have no hope of affording anything at all in the Sydney area. That means that people on low and lower-middle incomes are forced into the rental market. There are massive problems within the public housing system because the system has been starved of funds. Arguments go back and forth between the state and federal governments as to who is to blame for that, but the simple fact of the matter is that that does not help the people who are in need of public housing or who are living in public housing. Through our community programs in the Campbelltown area in particular, we are in direct contact with tenants who are attempting to argue just for basic maintenance to be done on their houses. The issues that come up when people move into houses or when basic maintenance is not done are quite enormous and are not being properly addressed.

We also have at the moment a situation in Minto, where the New South Wales Department of Housing have embarked on a program of bulldozing and redeveloping large sections of the local public housing estate. Among the main reasons that they give for that are poor planning by the state government in the first place and the poor maintenance of the buildings over the past 25 years. That is going to be hugely disruptive to the community. There is definitely a need for some change to occur there, but the lack of resources over a long period of time for the public housing system is creating massive problems for the people who live there. Then there are the people who are outside public housing and who desperately need to get in. As well as our national submission, I think you have had other submissions which show that particular people on low incomes cannot afford private rents. We are seeing in the Camden area, amongst other areas, people being forced out of the area in which they grew up because they cannot afford to rent there. Anyone who is a single person living on Centrelink benefits or who is a sole parent with one or two children living on Centrelink benefits cannot afford to find anything in the Campbelltown or Wollongong areas or elsewhere because they would be paying half or more of their income in rent.

One case study which I will finish with concerns the situations we see from time to time that are forcing people to take up extremely bleak options. In the past year we had a situation where a

mother arrived at one of our shops with her three children and was asking for help. She and her family had been living in another state, the father had recently left and shortly afterwards the house that they were renting burnt down. They had nowhere to live and they had put what little they had salvaged from the fire into their car and had headed to New South Wales. They had ended up, after three days of travelling and sleeping in their car, at one of our shops. A number of our volunteers helped them with showers and food and then spent five hours looking for any form of accommodation at all within 150 kilometres, including all of the Sydney area, but could find absolutely nothing. The New South Wales Department of Community Services and the New South Wales Department of Housing could not help them. The only option was to put them up in a motel but the motel owner was prepared to have them there for only a week. In that time they desperately searched for other accommodation and went to every real estate agent in the area but could not find anything. So after a week they were moved to another motel and the search kept going on, with the St Vincent de Paul volunteers and the family both looking for accommodation. Two weeks after they arrived in town, the mother told one of our volunteers that she had found the solution to their problems as she had found a job earning \$800 a week with free accommodation. That was working in an escort agency as a prostitute. She has three children who would now be between the ages of 11 and 16. That is perhaps a more extreme example, but it is an example of some of the situations that people are forced into because they feel that they have no other option. I will leave my remarks at that and say that we will look forward to seeing you in Wollongong.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Power.

Mr Dobson—I am the President of the Parramatta diocese of the St Vincent de Paul Society. It is my responsibility to try to coordinate and to work with the diocese and volunteers, as has just been mentioned, to ensure that we can support the people who come to the door in need. As has already been stated, we put a submission to your group. I fully support that and urge that at least some of the recommendations in it be worked through and that we have a continuing dialogue over the years to maintain an ongoing commitment to how we can solve a lot of these problems. I have listened to other speakers today. A number of them have put forward some good proposals that I feel we could be implementing as a team, not just as one party—the government saying no and yes and whatnot. We are Australians and team work is one of our specialities. If we do not use the team work and the specialities that we have, it is not much use for us to try to hold our head up as a really good country. Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Dobson. Mr Harrigan, do you want to say anything?

Mr Harrigan—I am the Treasurer of the St Vincent de Paul Society in the Parramatta diocese. The previous speakers from Parramatta have pretty well covered what I would have to say. All I will add to that is my own personal experience as a conference member, going out and visiting people in their homes and in their units to offer them the assistance they require. In the main, that is food assistance, because rising prices have not been matched by the welfare benefits that they receive and because of the excessive rents that they have to pay to stay in the precinct where they would normally stay, and the cost of medications which they are up for. The other thing, as you know, is that public schooling is no longer free, so for parents who have school aged children there are always excursions and bits and pieces tacked on to the normal outgoings it costs to put a kid through school. All these things leave parents short of money. Where there is

a gap, we in the St Vincent de Paul Society have to come along and support those people. And we support them through our own contributions. That is all I have to say.

CHAIR—Thank you, Mr Harrigan. How successful are you, if at all, in placing people in employment? Do you have some group of employers to whom you can go to bend their ear or twist their arm?

Mr Power—Probably our homeless services would be most involved in that. That is one area that St Vincent de Paul Society is not as heavily involved in. Our particular focuses tend to be on emergency financial assistance, homeless services and community work.

CHAIR—Maybe Ms Craig would like to comment.

Ms Craig—We do network with employers for our homeless men's hostels. We do not have anything, really, for single women. There are a lot of industrial areas in the outlying areas of Campbelltown and quite often process work becomes available. People might be employed for three or four days, and then the employment will be terminated—they put them on trial and after four days say, 'Sorry, it's not going to work.' There will be no pay but the Centrelink payment is stopped, so we see a lot of homelessness due to that. So we really had to look into who is good to refer to and who is not, as far as the workers go. There is a lot of process work out there, but there is too much unemployment to actually comment on how successful it is to refer people into that.

Ms Tipper—Mr Stone might like to talk on the work at Rutherglen to try to assist the community in developing their own skills. We have to develop basic personal skills before we can get to the employment stage with a lot of the people who come to services like Rutherglen, which is involved in community development. Mr Stone may wish to speak on that.

CHAIR—I think I have been to Rutherglen.

Mr Stone—Yes. I also met you out at Mt Druitt. The Mt Druitt area has a very large unemployed population. It sits in a conclave where there is really no employment around, and the people do not have the money to get to and from employment. However, we have had some success in dealing with the employers on the ADI site. They have arranged for various men to be picked up and taken out there. We do not have a large number of unemployed women come to our centre, mainly because most of them are single mums. But the men, just for their own human dignity, need to be doing something. As a result of the situation that they find themselves in, we end up having to bring them up to just basic skills. Some of them have no numeracy or literacy, and that is a problem. It is a disgrace for a country like Australia in the 21st century.

CHAIR—Thank you. Mr Power, what sort of financial assistance does the conference give?

Mr Power—Basically, the St Vincent de Paul Society calls on local groups of volunteers, often drawn out of local Catholic parishes, to respond to needs within their own district and to whoever needs help. The sorts of assistance that we tend to give—and they would vary a little from area to area, depending on the particular needs in that area and also on what resources we can actually get to that particular place—are food and financial assistance. We would assist people with household bills, particularly the household bills that threaten to cut off basic utilities.

CHAIR—But you pay them yourselves? You do not give a cash advance to the clients seeking assistance?

Mr Power—It would vary. We would probably tend not to. In the past we have experimented with giving cash directly, but we would tend to favour paying them ourselves. Again, the policy would change a little, because conditions change very much from district to district as to what is happening within that area. We would tend to make a contribution towards the bill, if that were the case, or provide direct food assistance or supermarket vouchers.

CHAIR—We have taken a lot of evidence, and I know that some agencies are very much opposed to cash settlements. Mr Dobson, did you want to say something?

Mr Dobson—Well, I support Paul on this issue. There is a variance in what we supply and how we supply it, and that basically comes back to where we start with our client. Most times we visit our client in their home, and that becomes the basis of how we can help in the best possible way. Most times, as you have said, we do not give cash. We go to food vouchers or food hampers, because we found out a number of years ago that cash outlay was not helping the situation in any way, shape or form, whereas giving food at least put something on the table that could be eaten and would sustain them. The money that they then had in their pockets could go to pay some bills. We look at the holistic approach of how best to suit the family that we visit

CHAIR—Do you have any financial planners in the association, or do you use the group we had before, the financial planners?

Mr Dobson—We have a budget counselling program, with stage one, stage two and stage three, in the training program for people in our organisation. When we go to people's homes, we work through their budget and try to alleviate whatever we can and put them on the right road. Our aim is not to be there all the time. Our aim is to help them and then move away and let them work at it themselves. That is the basis of who we are and what we do.

Mr Power—Our focus in that work is very much just on the household budget, rather than deeper financial issues. Bankruptcy issues and those sorts of things are not something that we specialise in, basically because there is not a need for our organisation to do that. There are other services around that we can refer people to. Our focus is on having trained volunteers who are very good and very effective in helping people manage the basic household budget and develop their own plan for handling that.

Ms Tipper—I put together a package for the committee, which I left with Mr Short to hand on to you, with some financial and statistical information from the previous financial year for the Parramatta diocese and some other documents on an inquiry into poverty that we did with Wollongong. The Parramatta and Wollongong dioceses did that in 1999, and, apart from possible increases in some of the statistics, I doubt there would be any major deviation from that report.

CHAIR—Senator Knowles and I have read the substantial contribution. Mr McCarthy is no doubt waiting to meet us in Canberra. As there are no other contributions, I thank you very much for coming along today. We will adjourn this session and go to Auburn and then to Fairfield.

Committee adjourned at 12.35 p.m.

