

**REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE**

**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ON LAW AND  
SAFETY**

**COMMUNITY SAFETY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL COMMUNITIES**

**At Back o' Bourke Information and Exhibition Centre, Bourke, on Tuesday 1 October  
2024**

**The Committee met at 11:00.**

**PRESENT**

Mr Edmond Atalla (Chair)

Dr Hugh McDermott (Deputy Chair)

Ms Maryanne Stuart

Mr Paul Toole

Mr Tri Vo

**The CHAIR:** Before we start, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the lands on which we are gathered here today and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. I extend that respect to other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who are present or viewing the proceedings online. Welcome to the first public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Committee on Law and Safety's inquiry into community safety in regional and rural communities.

I'm Edmond Atalla, the Chair of the Committee on Law and Safety. I'm joined by my parliamentary colleagues Dr Hugh McDermott, the member for Prospect and Deputy Chair; Ms Maryanne Stuart, the member for Heathcote; Mr Tri Vo, the member for Cabramatta; and Mr Paul Toole, the member for Bathurst. I thank the witnesses who are appearing before the Committee today and the many stakeholders who have made written submissions. We appreciate your input into the inquiry. I now declare the hearing open.

**Ms LEONIE BROWN**, General Manager, Bourke Shire Council, affirmed and examined

**Councillor LACHLAN FORD**, Bourke Shire Council, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** I welcome our first witnesses. Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that the Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos may be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos or videos taken. I need to confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses. Can you both confirm that you've received that information?

**LEONIE BROWN:** Confirmed.

**LACHLAN FORD:** Confirmed.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have any questions about this information?

**LEONIE BROWN:** No.

**LACHLAN FORD:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Would either of you like to make a brief opening statement?

**LEONIE BROWN:** I would like to welcome the New South Wales Parliament's Committee on Law and Safety to Bourke today as it makes its inquiry into community safety in regional and rural communities. The Committee is to be congratulated on travelling to Bourke, and I thank the Committee for the opportunity to provide evidence on behalf of Bourke Shire Council and the Bourke community. By way of background, I have lived in Bourke Shire my entire life, except for a relatively short six-year period at boarding school in Sydney.

Prior to boarding school I lived on the family farm near Fords Bridge, 120 kilometres north-west of Bourke, and post-school I have lived in town. Throughout my working life, I have been committed to the Bourke community through employment, including nursing, retail, and local government. I have worked for Council for 22 years—16 years of those as 2IC to the general manager and, for the past two years, as general manager. Since living in town, I have witnessed firsthand the impact of crime on our small and remote community.

I am joined at today's inquiry by Lachlan Ford. Lachie came to Bourke 22 years ago, and he also resides in town. He has been a Bourke Shire councillor since being initially elected in 2010. He was elected as deputy mayor in 2016 and held that position until the recent 2024 election. Lachlan has been re-elected to Bourke Shire Council for the next term. He has worked in the hotel industry for 20 years, juvenile justice for four years and, most recently, the irrigation industry. As you're aware, the township of Bourke is located 780 kilometres north-west of Sydney and 380 kilometres north-west of Dubbo. The shire has an area of 43,000 square kilometres. To put that into perspective, the area of the shire is two-thirds the size of Tasmania. The west boundary is 200 kilometres from Bourke, out at Wanaaring, and the north border stretches to Queensland.

Since 1996 Bourke has experienced a 42 per cent decline in population, from some 4,000 people to the estimated population in 2024 of 2,340. This population decline has a lot to do with the closure of the local abattoir, changes in water allocation to irrigated cotton and horticulture, extended drought, and the level of community crime. Bourke and the surrounding shire area is rich in Indigenous culture and history and is the traditional country of the Ngemba people. Thirty per cent of, or 708, people in the shire identify as Aboriginal, with 45 per cent aged 24 years or younger. Bourke Shire Council is a major employer in the community, employing 94 staff. That equates to 87 full-time equivalent staff.

Unfortunately, Bourke has been at the coalface of all forms of crime since the early 1980s, a period now exceeding more than 40 years. Bourke has suffered from offenders committing various offences, including stealing from businesses and homes, break and enters, domestic violence, breaking windows and shopfronts, stealing motor vehicles, and assaults. It has experienced rioting. At one point, in February 2013, Bourke was reported as the town that topped the state in six of the eight major crime categories during 2012—that was from the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research on local government areas—having the highest assault rate in the state, along with break-ins and car thefts. The quote from the Herald at the time was:

When compared with United Nations data, the crime rate of the Darling River town makes it more dangerous per capita than any country in the world.

This is certainly an unenviable record. Fast forward to the crime statistics for the 12-month period ending June 2023. Bourke is again reported as the most dangerous suburb in regional New South Wales based on population. During this time, Bourke recorded 622 serious offences, including 148 domestic assaults, 135 malicious damage

offences, 138 break and enters, 27 arson offences, and 24 sexual offences across its at-the-time population of 2,389 residents.

Unfortunately, little has changed apart from the fact that crime, especially youth crime, is not only a Bourke problem; it is now, as we all know, a national problem. Notwithstanding, the community, including police and Council, have for the past 44 years worked to find a solution. Bourke is fortunate to have a 24-hour police station. The men and women who don the uniform to protect our community work very hard to keep our community safe. Our commanders work to improve the situation for all.

As stated in Council's submission to the inquiry, submission No. 187, it is apparent that offenders are becoming younger and the crimes are becoming more severe. It was not that long ago when a five-year-old was involved in a car chase along with a 12-year-old in Bourke. Kids have stolen an ambulance. Kids have rammed a stolen car into cars parked out the front of the police station. Kids have invaded the homes of the vulnerable and menaced them at knife point. Kids have broken into a motel room and attacked the visiting magistrate. Kids as young as eight are more streetwise than you and I. How does this happen? Where are the parents or carers? Who is responsible and how do we, as a collective, resolve the issue?

The Maranguka Community Hub commenced operation in 2013. Programs and projects that run through Maranguka, along with other government and non-government agencies, have made a difference when they and we are all working for the same outcome. This was a key focus, with the daily check-in, school holiday programs, and other diversionary programs for wayward youth. Unfortunately, it's not enough. A potential solution for young offenders is a diversionary centre for the youth of Bourke, built on country. This facility would allow magistrates an option other than juvenile detention centres. I thank you for the opportunity.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your opening statement. We're going to allow the Committee to ask you some questions. I might start. As a council, what programs do you run for the youth in the area, if any? Which organisations do you work closely with to run these programs?

**LEONIE BROWN:** Up until July 2006, Council ran the youth facility. The PCYC then took over, which was fabulous. The PCYC has been here since July 2006, operating the youth facility. Since that time, we have engaged with many agencies, particularly the PCYC, but also Maranguka, CatholicCare, and Mission Australia. There's a number of agencies that we engage with and coordinate youth activities. We seek funding and support those activities through those opportunities.

Council owns the PCYC building. We maintain and manage the parks and gardens and sporting facilities that are available for the children. We also own and operate the swimming pool, which also has activities available for children. We also participate and fund those projects. Council does not have a youth officer, as such, but there are many agencies in Bourke that do have youth officers that coordinate with ourselves to create activities to assist with the youth.

**The CHAIR:** You've indicated that you run with a number of organisations, like Maranguka and so forth.

**LEONIE BROWN:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** How do you interact? Do you have regular meetings with those organisations to discuss the needs of what's required for the area?

**LEONIE BROWN:** As a council?

**The CHAIR:** Yes, as a council. Do you have a meeting where all those representative organisations will attend your meeting to discuss any issues that they have?

**LEONIE BROWN:** No, we don't do that. If needed, as required, we will meet with those organisations. There is a senior leadership group which meets quarterly, which brings together a lot of government and non-government agencies, and Council is part of that—so we do meet at a strategic level.

**The CHAIR:** Who runs this senior leadership group?

**LEONIE BROWN:** That's run by Maranguka. School holidays programs and those types of programs, certainly those meetings are coordinated probably bi-monthly and then, leading up to the school holidays, they're more regular, of course, and Council participates in those.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Firstly, thank you and congratulations on being elected, Councillor. You mentioned the diversionary centre, which you think Bourke needs as a way of diverting children from going to detention. Can you explore that for us—what that would mean and what you would need, like funding, size, et cetera?

**LEONIE BROWN:** I think it would be a whole-of-community facility that we require, and I think we need to bring the whole community in. But from a personal perspective, I can tell you what I think about it. I feel that it should be something that's on country. It needs to be something that is out of town and a facility that has everything is available, so it would have education, but we need to be able to teach some of these youths the basics of life. Some of these youths would not know how to cook a piece of toast in a toaster. They would go to the shop and buy a takeaway meal. How to put your clothes in the washing machine—just to teach them the normal functions of life, and love and nurturing through that opportunity. I think it would be something where there is basic education and where they can learn some work ethic.

I mentioned in my opening statement, 44 years we've been dealing with this and we've got three generations now where it's normal, the activities of these children, who are as young as five, up to eight, and what they are undertaking. It's what's been around their lives forever, though only a small handful. I will say that it's not everybody. It's just a small handful of unfortunate and vulnerable children. To get back to your point, I think the facility needs to be out in the country, and it needs to have education and a focus in regards to work as well to assist these children. It needs to be run by the Aboriginal people. We can have non-Aboriginal people in there, but the direction needs to be focused from an Aboriginal perspective.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** It seems from the evidence that we've found in the past 24 hours since we've been here that one of the drivers of youth crime, one of the drivers of why children are out there committing these crimes, is a very dysfunctional home life. Do you see this centre having accommodation as well, as a way of having the children staying there and being part of the education program?

**LEONIE BROWN:** Yes, I see it as an accommodation facility. I see it as what I would call a boarding school. It's not totally about education. We know they learn differently. It may be 20 minutes of education a day, but then it's just to learn work ethics and learn about what normal life is like.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** To try to break that cycle; is that what you're suggesting?

**LEONIE BROWN:** Yes.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** You mentioned that Council doesn't have a youth officer, and you use resources within the community. Do you think that Council needs a youth officer?

**LEONIE BROWN:** I don't. I think that there are so many organisations in this community that have youth officers. We've got enough of those resources. I have a manager and part of her work is working with the youth, but I don't have a youth officer that is actually going out and creating activities. In 2006 we had lots of youth officers, but now we have moved that onto other organisations. We're very happy to work with them but, from my point of view, I don't feel that is a requirement. Lachlan might have a different perspective.

**LACHLAN FORD:** No, I'm quite comfortable with us not having a youth officer. I feel there's a lot of money already invested into this community that puts a lot of people in that space. From my time with JJ [Juvenile Justice], I know that there was a huge amount of resources not always available at the right times of the day and night, but the resources are already there. For us, we would be doubling up and then trying to coordinate separate government departments, and I don't feel that that works very well if you're not part of that department. Hugh, do you mind if I speak to the centre that Leonie just spoke about?

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Of course. I was going to ask some more, so please do.

**LACHLAN FORD:** Going back to my time with Juvenile Justice, I found that a lot of our young people end up in detention from time to time, and that drives the next group of young people. When they come out of detention, they end up with another group of younger people, and then it drives it and it just keeps on growing. You find that a lot of them would come back from detention centres with the right frame of mind. If they'd been in there a little while, they'd had a bit of education, they'd had three meals a day, they were healthy, and a lot of them were back on medication that they should have been on all of their lives, for some of them. That meant that they came back in a good frame of mind. Within a fortnight of just being put back into a community, and quite often not into a place that was safe or offered any support or guidance, you were back to square one again. So often it was just a revolving door.

I would be guessing, but a hell of a lot of our crime in town comes from repeat offenders in that juvenile space. I'm the first to understand that detention centres aren't improving that. Obviously, there's a place for them for certain people, but we need to find a way when you come back to our community that you still have support within our community—you still have a very real job prospect, not a stop-and-go ticket, or a barista ticket. Neither of them are going to get you a job if you haven't got a licence or you're not used to getting out of bed in the morning. That sort of thing just keeps bringing us back down, and I feel that that's probably a major issue with it as well.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** So you're teaching life skills. Is that really what you're talking about for these children—to break the cycle of dysfunction from their home life and attempting to basically give them a clear foundation and pathway?

**LACHLAN FORD:** Yes.

**LEONIE BROWN:** Yes.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** How far have you got with this idea? Have you done costings? Have you done anything like that?

**LEONIE BROWN:** No, we haven't.

**LACHLAN FORD:** Not yet.

**LEONIE BROWN:** We've just spoken about it on many occasions, and I think it's something that Maranguka is very keen on as well, whether it's the same idea as what I've explained or it's something similar along those lines. But I think it's so important that we—in the words that you used—break that cycle.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** In your submission you talk about the Country Mayors Association's recommendations. There are 24. Is there any of those 24 you particularly want to highlight to us that you think that we should be particularly aware of?

**LEONIE BROWN:** Probably the main ones are the bail laws and the doli incapax—the impacts that has. As I stated in my introduction, the police work very, very hard. It's unfortunate and we don't want to incarcerate these youths. But these youths are repeat offenders. It's very difficult for them to have a child receive bail and then the next day they know that they've got to look for that child because, if there was an incident overnight, it's more than likely it's going to be that child, or that group of children. It's hard for the police because they have to write up so many documents. I think that's probably one of the main ones for me. But the other one is the new changes to the Bail Act that have been implemented, from the Moree incidents, are making a difference. I think that's important that we note that. That simple change can help us as a community and also help the police so that they can get out and do other work rather than just targeting certain youth that are going to be repeat offenders and are continuing to receive bail.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** I'm pleased to hear that it's working. That's the first positive we've heard, because they're new laws. Why do you think they're working? What are you seeing?

**LEONIE BROWN:** I meet with the police regularly or speak with the police regularly. It'd be on a weekly basis. I think Bourke court was one of the first ones to actually achieve an outcome from that—not receiving bail. The officer in charge said it just made such a difference to be able to know that there was something new that had been put in place and that the offender was not going to be bailed again for them to do another whole string of paperwork.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Thank you both for your submissions and for being here today. With the youth crime, do you admit not that there is youth crime but that there has been a significant increase here?

**LEONIE BROWN:** No. We've had youth crime for years. I don't know what you think, Mr Ford.

**LACHLAN FORD:** It has changed in the severity over the past few years and the age of the offenders.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Can you talk to me about the severity? What do you mean by that?

**LACHLAN FORD:** We didn't have problems with home invasions and motel room invasions and crimes at knife point, for instance, in the past. We've always being a town—and I hate to use the word "traditionally" in this sense—that's traditionally had a lot of stolen cars, but that's far more victimless than having your motel room broken into, when you're the local magistrate, at knife point with three young people. That has definitely risen, and the age of the children is a lot younger than it was in the past. The severity of that crime puts a lot of fear in our community, especially our older people. We have a lot of people that work at our abattoirs now that aren't from Australia. They're quite caring and not used to this sort of thing, and they've come home to have their houses ransacked daily. They pick their targets. That sort of thing has definitely increased.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Why do you think the youth are undertaking these crimes? What do you think the drivers are? What do you think motivates them?

**LEONIE BROWN:** They're at-risk youths. Their home life—we couldn't imagine, I imagine, how some of these children are living, and what's happening within their homes. In the Council's submission, there is a statement there, that a past mayor actually wrote, about children as young as five who had knocked on the police doors at 6.00 a.m. in the morning and asked to be taken home. And the police asked, "Where have you been?"

And they said, "It was safer to be on the streets than what it was to be home last night." That is probably predominantly why. It's their home. The risks that faced them at home over the years has continued on. It has continued down through the generations for some families.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** The Chair has explained that we will identify findings and make recommendations as a result of this inquiry. What are some of the recommendations you would like the government to consider?

**LEONIE BROWN:** I would like the government to consider funding some sort of a facility that we can have here, and that's probably an expensive option. But, if it is expensive, it might be cheaper in the long run. Some sort of facility that we can have our young people able to go to is important, and I guess other opportunities. Bourke has a lot of agencies. We have a lot of government funding coming into town. I don't know that we need any more money for that. Identify where and how that money is being spent so that we get better outcomes.

**LACHLAN FORD:** I just wanted to speak to that as well. I think we lack youth mental health services. I don't even think we have one in town at the moment. For instance, the availability of being able to get a child in to see a doctor that has ADHD or fetal alcohol syndrome—there's no assistance for that out here. It's very difficult. A lot of our families don't want to engage with government departments. If you don't get the help that you need as a child, by the time you get to your early teens, things have escalated, and this is where I think we find ourselves at times.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** I have a supplementary question for Ms Brown. If you say that your recommendation to the government is to build this centre, how is that different to where we've got schools? We know that children do well when they go and study at school and receive an education. What is different between a school and the centre?

**LEONIE BROWN:** I think it would be very different because it won't be supplementary to a school; it will be supplementary to a juvenile detention centre.

**The CHAIR:** A boarding house?

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** So a boarding school where it's mandatory for them to attend; is that what you're seeking?

**LEONIE BROWN:** Yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** Thank you, General Manager Brown and Councillor Ford, for attending. Your input and submission is very important for this hearing. General Manager, you mentioned the population has decreased, has pretty much halved from 4,000 and something to 2,000. In what space of time was that?

**LEONIE BROWN:** That has occurred since 2000 to date.

**Mr TRI VO:** About 20 years to date, and a bit more.

**LEONIE BROWN:** That's 24 years.

**Mr TRI VO:** What percentage do you think was due to the closure of the abattoir and what percentage was because of the increase in crime?

**LEONIE BROWN:** They go hand in hand. The abattoir was employing people with basic skills and, of course, when that work is not available, there's no work for them. So they're at home and they're bored. It's difficult to say, but I think they go hand in hand. I couldn't give you a percentage on it.

**Mr TRI VO:** How many people were employed in the abattoirs?

**LEONIE BROWN:** The current abattoir is employing 200 people. The old abattoir would have employed something along those lines as well.

**Mr TRI VO:** You mentioned services for mental health and the boarding school. Do you think young people trust Council to deliver the appropriate services for these needs?

**LEONIE BROWN:** I'm not sure that it's a Council responsibility. It's a diversionary centre. It would be a whole-of-community responsibility, I would feel, if that's what the question is. Would Council deliver that facility—is that the question?

**Mr TRI VO:** Yes. Would families and young people trust Council in delivering it, and would Council be able to deliver those services?

**LEONIE BROWN:** We would work with the whole of community to be able to deliver such a facility. We are very keen to see something like that come to Bourke. We would fully support it and do what we need to

do to encourage such a facility to be built and created. The facility could already be here; we just need to do some maintenance to put it on the ground.

**LACHLAN FORD:** I agree with the general manager that I don't think it would be a role that we would be able to take on on our own. A lot of community consultation would have to go into it, and we'd be happy to work with anyone involved. I think probably the key to anything like that working is that it becomes something that can be court mandated, to allow magistrates the opportunity to have a diversionary tactic. At the moment, you're either given bail or you're going into custody. They put bail conditions down to go to school, but they're not enforceable. That's where the change needs to come in, in my mind.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Firstly, thank you both for attending the hearing today and for the submission on behalf of the community. Thank you for the work that you have done in the community with all the different organisations here over the years as well. What I want to explore is the fact that in your submission you made a comment that local government has to provide a six-monthly progress report. You also called out that government and non-government agencies should be providing that feedback to the local community so there's accountability and transparency, so we can actually track to see what outcomes have been achieved from various grants and funding that has been provided in the past. I want to explore that a little bit further with you before the next question.

**LEONIE BROWN:** Yes, integrated planning and reporting, which no doubt you're familiar with, came in in 2013, and it's probably the best thing that has come into local government. We are now required to deliver a report every six months to our community to see what we've achieved. It's not just about grant funding; it's about all of our operations, whether it's water, sewer, roads, or grant funding that we have received. If we're doing that, other agencies could report back to community also and make those reports available.

Quite often somebody will say to me, "What has that agency done?" I can reach out to the agency and say, "What have you achieved?", but it would be nice if you didn't have to do that. You could see it; it's available; it's on your website. We've got something, hand on heart, to say, "This is what the outcomes are from", whether it's an activity they've had, or a lot of their funding would come through for operating, not just for specific projects. It might be the employment of a youth officer, and these are the activities that we've undertaken, these are the kids that we've targeted, and these are the outcomes that we've had from those kids. That would go a long way for community to know what's actually happening.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** To the question on funding, you said that funding is not necessarily an issue. Is the funding not coordinated enough and we have NGOs and government organisations working in silos, or is there good collaboration, or could we do it better?

**LEONIE BROWN:** I think we are probably improving slowly, but certainly working in silos has been an issue previously. To have a coordination of those services and know where the funding is going, so we aren't having duplication of services and we are getting outcomes, is very important. I know Moree has done that well. I think there's an opportunity that we could do something similar here in Bourke to actually bring together the organisations so that we do get better outcomes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for appearing before the Committee today. You'll be provided with a copy of the transcript from today's proceedings for corrections. The Committee staff will also email any supplementary questions from the Committee. Do you have any objections to responding?

**LACHLAN FORD:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Once again, thank you very much. I wish you all the best.

**LACHLAN FORD:** I appreciate your time. Thanks for coming out.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**



**Ms ROZARIA SUCKLING**, Club Manager, PCYC Bourke, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** I welcome our next witness, Ms Rozaria Suckling. Thank you for appearing before the Committee to give evidence today. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos will be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly's social media pages. Please inform the Committee staff if you object to having photos or videos taken. Can you please confirm that you have been issued with the Committee's terms of reference and information about the standing orders that relate to the examination of witnesses?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have any questions about this information?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** No.

**The CHAIR:** The set-up looks a bit overwhelming, but please be relaxed. We're all friends. Would you like to make a short opening statement to begin?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** No.

**The CHAIR:** I might start the questions. Can you give us a run-down of the programs that PCYC is running for the youth and the time frames they are running these programs?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Monday to Thursday, we have a homework centre. That's open to all ages from six to 18 years. That's your primary and your high school. The homework centre gives the children an opportunity to come into our club. If they've got homework, assessments, or any of the above, our support is there. Then, for the kids who obviously don't like to do homework or assessments, we run activities, whether that's on the courts—so your ball games and that—or just your arts and crafts, chill time, or reading books, because we have, over time, experienced and witnessed that a lot of kids have a lot of differences. A lot of kids don't like doing physical activity and a lot of kids don't like reading books, so we try to provide a bit of everything for all kids to make sure that everyone feels welcome, everyone's having a good time, and we're able to keep everyone occupied.

Friday nights, we have our U-Nites, which is meant to be a police program, but PCYC has started running 90 per cent of that. That's from 5.30 p.m. until 10.00 p.m. Again, that's school ages. It's just doing activities in the club and providing dinner for all the youth, making sure our youth are getting fed. Then they will get dropped home. It's the same with all our afternoon programs: children are fed and then taken home. At the moment, we have our two-week holiday program. We collaborate with Maranguka and other youth services.

**The CHAIR:** That's great. How many attend those Friday night programs? What's your attendance like?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Our numbers have not been below 30 the last two months.

**The CHAIR:** That's great to hear.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Thank you for being here today. We really appreciate it. We've only been here for 24 hours but we've already heard a lot of the good work that you're doing at PCYC. It's a huge challenge, but thank you for the work you're doing. Did you say you've got children from six years up to 18?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Yes.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** It's a big spread. We've heard a lot about diversion into sport—rugby league and those types of things—but you touched on how there are a lot of kids who aren't interested in sport. What do you do with those children? Can you put to us things that you need to help those children?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** We just—not divide them, but it's more that, when they come in, you just open up all areas and wherever they choose to go, they go. Lately, we've been doing loom bands. I think that's what they're called. There are a lot of kids. We sit around a table. Honestly, I've never seen a table so full. We just try to pull out different activities each time and we see what the kids are interested in because, at the end of the day, it's about keeping them happy—their likes, not just what we like. Then there are a few times staff will run pretty good games that the kids like. It's just more that each week we're looking for what the kids enjoy.

Sometimes we'll even ask them, "What would you like?" A lot of kids love and have asked for clay, so I think that's our next step. That's just ordering different resources and all that to bring into the club and say, "If this is what the kids are into, let's get it in", because, at the end of the day, it's about keeping them happy. If there's a mess, there's a mess. The more kids we get into the club, the better. That's what I try to push for, and just making all children aware that everyone is welcome, not just these kids or these kids—all schools, all kids.

We do encourage, for kids under the age of six, their parents to come in with them, if they would like to come. Parents are more than welcome to come to our facility and come to our programs with children under that age. A lot of them do. It's great to see when parents do come along with their kids, because we want their parents to still be involved in activities.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Obviously, we're here because we're looking at youth crime, the issues regarding that and what the drivers are, but also what can be put in place to try to help that issue. Obviously, you're very engaged with the local community and with youth in that community. Are there any particular further programs, further funding or further strategies you think might be able to help your community along those lines?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** I'm going to be honest, okay. I swore I would. I have been in PCYC for eight years—seen a lot, hear a lot, do a lot. I've been to juvenile. I've been attending a lot of meetings. I've done a lot to try and come down to the bottom of what we can do for these kids. I work with a lot of these kids that come out of juvenile and I've got a good relationship with them. The same with Maranguka. Honestly, there's nothing we can do to help these kids. It comes down to parents and to their home.

We can run so many programs. We can try and do so much to try and get them interested, but what we've all come to terms with over the last year of doing meetings, juvenile, talking to these kids, having one-on-ones, is it's their home life—what happens behind closed doors. We could run program after program, put so much money into different resources. We could do so much, but once they're home, they don't want to be home, and that's why the crime starts. They love the programs. They love everything that's gone into them, and they're occupied. They like riding their motorbikes and that. But the minute they're home, they don't want to be home, so that's why, at that two or three o'clock in the morning, they will go and steal a vehicle.

They love juvenile. Eight boys have told me that. They absolutely love juvenile. Why? They get cared for. They get the attention, the care, the love and that, that they don't get at home. That's why they love that, because the workers at juvenile give them that attention, show them that love that they're missing out on at home. They get a bed. They get a blanket, and they get food, a good routine. They learn at juvenile. They do TAFE. They learn about their culture. So I think me stepping into that juvenile to check up on my youth, being in there in the space that they're in, seeing how happy they are, how safe they feel—they come back here, they're not safe. A lot of community and a lot of people outside of community don't know half of what these kids have gone through. Unfortunately, in this role you've got to know it, or you see it, or you hear it. Unfortunately, it's something the whole community doesn't know about.

In the day I have policies and procedures I've got to follow. I've signed the contract saying what I hear and what I see stays. Unfortunately, as I said, there's a lot that a lot of people don't know about with our families here in this community, and it's a sad thing. But, as I said, no matter what we do, once they're home, they're home. If we could have something run 24/7, that would probably be the best way. But, at the end of the day, who wants to work all hours of the night, besides the police?

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** That was very powerful, so thank you for saying that and for that honesty. We really appreciate it. Can we just take a step then to that home life, and this is probably the most loaded question you'll get today. Is there anything we can do to try and fix their home lives, or is that too big a question?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** No, it's not. I'm just trying to say it. Honestly, DCJ can't even remove kids. They're having trouble removing the kids and, honestly, that's the best option at the end of the day, and it's sad but it's true. It's very true. A lot of these kids would do anything to be elsewhere, or there's a lot of domestic violence, but that other parent will always find their way back home or to their kids. At the end of the day, it comes down to the parents. And what you can do about that, I'm not aware. But as long as we're—all of us youth services, we do check up on these children frequently. We do make sure they're okay. But, at the end of the day, once DCJ is involved, we're not allowed to be. So, yes. I'm sorry.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Thank you for that. We really appreciate it.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Thank you for being here today. What agencies do you work with? I know that the police are involved and the PCYC, but what other community groups?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** So you've got Maranguka, which I work very closely with; you've got CatholicCare, Mission Australia, Birrang and, obviously, the schools. I feel like I'm missing one, but I just can't think right now, I'm sorry.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** That's okay. What about the programs that you run? Obviously, they are still powerful programs. There's what you do before school, after school, the evenings on a Friday. You get good numbers attend. How do you get that message out into the community about what PCYC is actually doing?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** We just advertise it—drop stuff up to the school, get the schools to announce it at their assemblies. Facebook, I find, seems to be a good way. A few services do go on the news, like 2WEB and 2CUZ. Kids like to go to their friends and tell their friends.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** You're a young person, so they would talk to you and you'd hear a lot. Do you think a lot of the crime that occurs is a game? I know that the family life is difficult, but does it become then a situation whereby young kids are getting involved because their siblings are actually involved in stealing cars? I know that some of those kids would actually go to your program, but when they're picked up by their older siblings then they would change when they walk out that door.

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** They do—but then I can't say that, because a lot of our ringleaders are actually young kids. A lot of the older people try to push and persuade the younger kids to do the dirty work, because they're not going to go away and get sentenced for as long as what someone 18-plus is, but that's the sad thing, because then our youth are getting into trouble as well. Some youth do do it for fun. Some youth have admitted they love stealing cars. They just love driving cars, and that's when Maranguka got—I don't know what they're called, sorry—mechanical cars that you see at arcades. They've got two of them and the kids love them.

These kids, honestly, are truly talented. I don't know how to hot-wire a car; these kids do. Lately I have had a few meetings with Gerard Lawson, the boss of police, and we've actually thought, what are some programs we can start for these kids, like if we can get a mechanic, or woodwork. We've started picking up on a few things that a lot of these youth do enjoy, but they won't attend programs because they're up all night and sleep all day. We are trying very hard to look into different ideas and ways to persuade these kids and to keep them out of trouble. Touch wood, though, the numbers have been good lately—touch wood—with no crime.

**Mr TRI VO:** What backgrounds are these kids from?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** The majority of these kids are Aboriginal. I think a lot of families play on the Stolen Generation, which is why DCJ have such a hard time trying to do their job.

**Mr TRI VO:** When they are in your programs, do they listen to you?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** They are very good kids, yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** They listen to you, and you have influence over them to change?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** All the services do, yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** Why do you think we cannot do anything? Is it because they are more influenced by their family members?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Yes, they are.

**Mr TRI VO:** I'm quite sad to hear that we can't do anything. The reason I'm quite sad is that they've been here in this country for 65,000 years. They're the custodians of this wonderful country, and they're the oldest continuous living culture in the world. With this problem we say that we—and not just from you, from even the other organisations and departments that attend. They come down to problems in the family.

So they've been here 65,000 years. Recently, in the last I'm not quite sure how many years—100 years or 200 years—they've got all these problems. We come to the stage where we say, "It's very hard to change because it's in the family." Do you think it is a societal problem that we brought on them in the last 100 or 200 years and maybe we can find a solution by changing one generation to the next, especially the older generations? Maybe we can start or the government can have some intervention or closing the gap where we can change older generations, whereby the older generations are able to change the younger generations and keeps them going. Because I think that's the only way we can change. We can't say we can't have a solution. Of course, people like you are great. You've been there for eight years helping all these young people.

**The CHAIR:** Is there a question there, Mr Vo?

**Mr TRI VO:** Do you think we can do more?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Drugs and alcohol play a lot into this as well. A lot of us have been questioning, would it be good to have a rehab centre here, or someone that works within the drug and alcohol industry that could be here five days a week. A lot of these kids are unfortunately on the heavy stuff.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** What do you mean by heavy stuff?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Ice.

**Mr TRI VO:** So a lot of these problems are also caused by drugs, ice and cannabis—

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Yes. We've had a fair amount of youth that have been drinking alcohol as well. And that's from the age of 13.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** There is no rehab centre in Bourke at the moment?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** No.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Do they have any counsellors at all to do with drugs and alcohol?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** We're all still trying to work that out. I think there is. Or there are people who come out every now and then, but to have someone here five days a week—I honestly believe that would be ideal for this community.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** I'm just really surprised to hear that. I did not expect that.

**Mr TRI VO:** It's not just these youth; it is actually the families that it comes back to, relatives and family members that take drugs. So maybe that is one way we can try to help.

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Yes.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** First of all, thank you so much for being here. Thank you so much for everything that you do. It's not hard to see how much you care for each and every one of these little people. It comes across here. And the amount of dedication and work that you are putting into that as well—I have no doubt you probably aren't aware of the impact that you are making and the changes that you are making. I just wanted to say thank you very much for everything that you've been doing. There are about 30 children that come into your service. Is that normal? Have you seen higher?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** No, it's normal. During our holiday programs, we do see a lot higher, but 30 is your everyday number.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** What is the majority age of this cohort?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** From eight to 14.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** You said, "I can't hot-wire a car. These kids are really smart." One of the things that I've noticed is that there is a TAFE college here, but there are no TAFE teachers and there is no staff. Having those sorts of courses here, do you think would assist them?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** Yes.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** I have nothing further. But, once again, you are clearly a young person yourself and are very inspirational.

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** I am a proud Aboriginal woman. I'm a Barkindji-Malyangapa woman born and raised in Bourke. So I do care a lot about my people. Unfortunately, the majority of the crime from what everyone is hearing is from Aboriginal people, so you want them to do better. That's why I'm very passionate about getting these kids on the right path, or trying to find things and ways to help them out.

**The CHAIR:** Rozaria, before you we had Bourke Shire Council here. They suggested that they want to see a facility similar to a boarding house established in Bourke—a mandatory facility where kids, instead of going to jail, could go to that community facility—

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Youth detention.

**The CHAIR:** —that detention centre, where they can be educated.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Sorry, a diversionary centre.

**The CHAIR:** A diversionary centre. Do you have any thoughts on that? Do you think that idea will work or won't work?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** I reckon it could be a good idea, yes. But, as I said, I personally feel having something where kids can sleep of a night would probably be best.

**The CHAIR:** That's what they're suggesting—for this facility centre to be like an accommodation basis.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Their ideas, and they've fleshed them out—if you don't mind, Chair—was to have a place where they can have accommodation. Rather than go to youth detention, they would go there. They would learn life skills. It wouldn't just be about schooling or education; it would be about life skills to basically try to break those cycles of institutional abuse, poverty et cetera and give them a foundation.

**The CHAIR:** And get them away from their parents.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** And to have it local so that it's not out of country.

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** I feel that would be a good idea, yes.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for appearing before the Committee. You will be given the transcript of your evidence today for any corrections that you wish to make. The Committee staff will also email any supplementary questions that the Committee might have. Do you have any last questions?

**ROZARIA SUCKLING:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much for your attendance. You've been great.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**Mr PHILLIP SULLIVAN**, Chair, Bourke Tribal Council, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Committee members, I'd like to advise that we've had a slight change to the program. Witnesses from Walgett Shire Council are not attending and in their place I have agreed to hear from Uncle Phil Sullivan. Thank you, Uncle Phil, for appearing before the Committee. Please note that Committee staff will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. The photos and videos will be used on the New South Wales Legislative Assembly social media pages. Please inform the Committee should you object to having your photo taken. Have you been issued with the Committee's terms of reference? I presume you haven't because you weren't originally scheduled to appear.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** That language is new to me.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Do you know why we are here, mate? Has that been explained to you?

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** Sort of. Kind of, yes. They just told me to come down here this morning and said this mob from the government was coming and wanted to talk to people.

**The CHAIR:** Uncle Sullivan, this is the parliamentary Committee on Law and Safety. The parliamentary Committee is holding this public inquiry, both here in Bourke and in Broken Hill tomorrow, to hear from stakeholders such as yourself about the drivers of youth crime in the area and your views on those drivers and what you believe could be solutions to those issues. That's the purpose of this Committee hearing.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I understand.

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to make some comments or an opening statement before we ask Committee members to ask you some questions?

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I was born in Brewarrina. I've lived in Bourke since '67. I moved here from Brewarrina. I followed Mum because all her siblings were here in Bourke. I've lived in Bourke since '67 or '68. There's one comment I would make that might open it up to a wider discussion around law: How does law fit into the culture of the First Nations people and the effect of that law. I heard a little bit of conversation about our youth earlier and how it affects our youth, our families, and our law. Our law is now governed by roads and fence lines, with no access to our camp-world. That is because of the law. Where does that law come from? It comes from that side of the river. We have our law on this side of the river. Now that law is coming across this side of the river and having an impact on our people, which are also your people. I'd just finish with that.

**The CHAIR:** Could you give us a run-down of the Bourke Tribal Council, which you represent? Tell us what you do.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** We used to have what they called a "working party". We had that for a long, long time. It was a voice for us, but that's all it was: a voice. We weren't getting anything out of it. There's a group of us that pulled away from that and decided that the best way to do it is that we have the authority to deal with it for ourselves. We decided to set up the Bourke Tribal Council and then set up the business end of that, which is Maranguka. For about 10 years now we've been going pretty steady. We're not full on properly at the moment. The way that we started was we sat at a place with a couple of the Elders at one time and got the names of all of our Aboriginal people in our community of Bourke. We worked out how many tribes of those were in our community, and we worked it out that there were 26 tribes—different languages, different groups. There's 26 of those. From that, we decided to set up this Maranguka-Bourke Tribal Council process. That was well before the millennium drought, I think.

A lot of our people nomaded themselves away to other communities in Bathurst, Dubbo, and Sydney—all of those other places—where there was resettlement, because our camp-world was pretty wrecked. A lot of farmers have left, so our community has shrunk, and so did the Bourke Tribal Council. It went from 26 seats to 17 seats, which we have today. Those 26 seats are still there if they ever come home again. This is still their home as far as we're concerned, if they want to come home and still have their say in the community again. That's the start of this organisation called Maranguka and the Bourke Tribal Council. That was the start of it right there. It's still going steady.

We do have a long way to go, in regards to getting what we would call a percentage of righteousness and truth, but not 100 per cent. We still have a long way to go to work from that side of the river, in regards to how that is managed on that side. Everything we do on our side, we falter a lot. Organisations like our land councils and our AMSs [Aboriginal Medical Services] suffer with that, because we don't understand what's happening on that side of the river. Maranguka is set up so that we can actually learn a lot more about what's happening on that side of the river, particularly the legal side, the health side, and the education side. What are their aspirations for our people on this side of the river? I know the law is written for all of us, but then it's not. And 2023 was a good

example, when we went to vote. Again, we were left out of that process. If you're talking about law, your highest law has left us out of saying anything. If I was going to talk about anything, it'd be that. If you want to hone down into something, it'd be something like children and water. Both of those issues are very important to our people. I might just stop there and we can go from that, if you like.

**The CHAIR:** Are you happy to take some questions from some of the Committee?

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I'm happy. I'll do what I can to the best I can, anyway.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** You mentioned children and water. We'll stick to children this time. When you say it's important, what we're seeing is increased youth crime. What we're hearing is that, a lot of the time, the driver of that youth crime is the fact that it isn't a good home life they're in. There's a lot dysfunction and issues. They're bored. There are no jobs or opportunities et cetera. They don't want to go to school because the dysfunction affects them there as well. Do you see a way or a strategy to try to deal with this and fix those home lives—maybe getting children onto a different type of path?

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** Our survival tells us that we've survived for so long—a long time, since the beginning of time, if I could say that. There were also rules and laws that were in place for that to happen, particularly our children. Those laws have been taken away from us. That's the main part right there. The responsibility of the parents is the first and not the last. At the moment the law's changed that around. Now the child has the most important say when it comes to the law, and not the parent. That's what's missing, is their say—their right say, their truthful say, in regard to raising their children.

You will say, "What about housing? What about alcohol? What about education? What about all those other things?" But every one of those issues is not coming from us—from our people, from our law. It's actually still coming from that side of the river. We have to fall under that umbrella, and falling under that umbrella takes the responsibility away from our parents. That's the biggest issue we have. If you want to change that, then you have to do what you're doing now, today. I think this is really great. It's for us to sit back and have a talk about this and have a yarn. I'm only one at the moment, but there are 100 of them out the back there that can come and do this. I just got told by my daughter that you were going to be here today. I thought, "I'm going to go and check this out and see what they're going to be talking about."

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** I'm pleased you have, mate. I really am.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I think more of this stuff on the ground level—you coming to talk to me, coming to talk to us—I think that's the critical part.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** How do we turn that around, mate? How do we change those laws around?

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** Do exactly what you've just done today. Keep coming. Keep going to Brewarrina; keep coming to Bourke; keep going to Wilcannia. Go to Wilcannia—go there and you'll see what I'm talking about. It's still tin-shack times over there. All of their Elders—they've got to go to Broken Hill to get fixed up, even though there's a hospital there. Go there and just have a look at it. Go and have a look at the way they're stayed. Go and have a look at how they stay here, just down the road, and then you'll see what I'm saying.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** You mean at the reserve?

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I'm talking about the reserve, yes.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** We had a quick look at it yesterday.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** But do you know what? That's 100 per cent compared to when I used to live there. They had no water there. They had no electricity there. They had no sewerage stuff there. We were living in tin shacks then. That was the best times. You need to come, brother. We just need for you to have the—there's this middle ground, and they're doing the job that they're supposed to do. The police, the doctors, all of those public servants—they're doing a good job, but you put more pressure on them by changing what's up here and not really listening to what's really down here.

You would have heard the little sister who was sitting here, the general manager for the Shire. She would have talked a little bit about that type of stuff. I can look around my community now, and it is not doing much for our community. It's not good at all. This is probably why you're here—because of the rates of crime that are happening, because of housing issues, because of that. It is because you're listening to people on the road map to that side of the river, and not to what's happening here on the ground. That's why Maranguka and the Bourke Tribal Council was set up—to take away that place and actually talk to the people who can make a proper decision for us, and not listening to a whole lot of procedures that they have to follow to make that process. I think people in the communities know what they want in their communities, and I think that's what you need. Sorry, not to tell you what to do, but I think that's what it needs.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** That's what we're here for, mate—for you to tell us, so we can try and make it happen.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** Yes. You need to be at that space then. We don't get this opportunity to talk to people like yourself and public servants face to face and tell them the real deal, what is really happening. All of those things that you have are good. All of those things you have are also bad. They're bad because what you're doing is you're interfering with a law that's been—no disrespect, again—in this ngurrampaa, this camp-world, since the beginning of time. I'm just saying that when one of our people commits suicide, that would happen in every hundred years, but now it's happening every year, and there's nothing done about that. Aboriginal deaths in custody—when are we going to get to that? Have we started on that? That's 30 years ago when that was done. We haven't done nothing from that side of the river but it's still your place to do that, to start something on that matter.

Our people are still falling by the wayside in prisons and that sort of stuff—still falling by the way, out on the street, because of that. There's still nothing to be done about it, which I think is humanity. Forget I'm zipped up in black skin and I have a different culture, and the same with you mob—that you're zipped up in other skins and you have different cultures, and you have to follow a law. But by doing that, you've actually stripped our law apart, if you want to talk about law. Law governs children. I know of a place where that little nine-year-old boy, his first step into manhood and the moment that happens, it changes his whole life to be a young man—a young boy, a young man, growing up to be a man. His responsibility is to come back around and do the same thing, but that's been stripped away from us. I dare say it'd be the same with the ladies, but I don't talk about ladies' business because that's ladies' business.

**Mr TRI VO:** Thank you, Mr Phillip Sullivan, for attending today. What you've said is very important for this hearing. I gather that we're here to listen to you and to, hopefully, whatever it is, it will help us to make the necessary policies for this State. You mentioned Broken Hill. We are going to Broken Hill tomorrow to hear witnesses like yourself and we'll continue to work together, so please pass on the message to your Elders and the people you know that we're here in good faith to listen to you.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I can see that, yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** We're here to listen to you and I hope that we will find better solutions. You said with this law, our country's imposing on your country and on your people. If you can describe it in simple terms for us to understand, because I understand there are family problems, drug problems in the family and a lot of problems in the family that's very hard for the system to fix. In your understanding, as an Elder, what can the system of government do to help change the family, to improve the family? It's a generation-to-generation thing. If they're living in the family and they can't help themselves, how can they help their children? What can the Government do to improve and help these families so they can help themselves and help the younger children?

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I think the first thing you've done is sit here. That's the first thing. You've come to us.

**Mr TRI VO:** We will continue to do that.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** Other times we get a phone and we ring this, we get a paper and then we write this, but the best thing you've done first is to come sit with us, and that's a great honour because then you get to hear the voice, hear the young girl who just went. You hear those things. That's really the truth then. There's no mucking around with that. I think that's the first thing you've done. I spoke to the Chair earlier. This is probably the best place to be, to come and sit down and listen and talk. I will be honest with you, it might take you a long time and you might get a lot of angry men and women walking to this table, and, I'll be honest with you, you will, straight at you. They'll probably even throw a few curse words at you, if you know what I mean.

**Mr TRI VO:** That's understandable.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** That will happen, but you can't beat sitting down talking to you fellas. It's just a really great honour that you've come. I think that's the first thing. I think then listen to what they would have to say. I know, when it comes to family, that has to be one of the first things. You asked the question about the young ones. That would be the first thing that they would want to talk about, their family. Who owns their family? Who is in control of their family? Are you people in control of that? Is the law in control of that? That'll be the sorts of things that they will want to know: Who is in control of our family, of our young ones who are running amok in the community?

I tell you, if I just look sideways at my mum when I know she's in the right, there's going to be a strap or a stick straight around my leg straightaway, and that's not because she hates me; it's because she loves me, and I disrespected that by looking the way I looked. That might not be very good in a law perspective, but when it comes to culture law, and I talk about the beginning of time, it is because of that, because there was discipline



told to that young fella when he went on his first men's business. There was discipline even before he went into that space. He knew what he had to do. He knew where he could go and what he could not do, and so that law was already placed on his heart, not in his head.

Now our children walk around with phones and everything, and that's all in their head, and you're not attacking what's in their heart and in their spirit. That's what's not happening, because the mother and the father can't do it anymore, because you've taken that responsibility away from them. I'm being straight here, because I see it on the street. I see it every day. I saw it when I drove here, how our children are wayward away from who they really are, their identity. If you take that identity away, which you already have, then you'll destroy us again. So you need to sit down like this and have a yarn, have a talk, and say, "Where do we start from?" I would say start small first, start all over again. That'll be my only answer right up the front is to start again.

**Mr TRI VO:** So pretty much the main thing is working together, try and understand your culture and people and listening.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** No, sorry. Who are you? I want to know about you before that, because I know you know what yes and no mean. I know there is a right place in your heart. That's what you have to report to the table, that part there. What is truth? What isn't truth? I go for this here but I'm just going to hold this up. It's not about law, it's about you. A little sister back in the back here, I had a yarn with her. But the first thing she did when I walked in this room before you came along, she walked straight over to me. I didn't know her from a bar of soap. I knew what she looked like, but she comes straight to me and she said, "We have not started yet." She did not know how to start, but she came, brother. She came and she wanted to talk to me. You can't beat that. You can't walk away from that. That's truth. She never laid anything on me. She just introduced me to herself by just coming there, and I think that's what's missing.

**Mr TRI VO:** So reach out and try to learn and make a difference.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** Mate, it is so important, yes. You got a good lady there. I promise you, all right. Good lady. That's the way it should be done with our people. You go to Wilcannia. You will get your [Aboriginal language word]. You will get the time when they will curse you. I'm being honest with you, all right? But you've still got to go there regardless. Regardless, you've still got to go there and sit down and talk with them, and that's where you'll get all your answers you're looking for.

**Mr TRI VO:** I agree. We have to listen to the truth and have to learn the truth.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** It comes from here. It doesn't come from there. Or not that book there anyway. I'll put that over there. Because it all comes from that book. But it comes from here first—your truth. Your truth makes my truth.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Uncle Phil, thanks so much for being here today and for everything that you have said. You are teaching us, and I thank you. You say it's an honour for you to be here. Let me tell you, mate, it's the other way around. It's an absolute honour to be here in your presence, to listen and to hear your teachings. I promise you this is just the start. This is the first conversation. We will be having many.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** My father gave me a name that's called Sullivan, because his father give it to him and his father give it to him and his father give it to him, which is my great-great grandfather, Fred Sullivan, zipped up in white skin. I used to hate white people cause of what they've done to us. I used to hate them. But I can't. I can't afford to do it. Because you're my people too. Because of him. So I've got to walk this road on the edge and learn and adapt to what you've got. Might go against me, but I still have to learn, still at a learning curve. I'm 64 and I'm still learning on that side of the river. So thank you for your comment. I appreciate that.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** By chance there was a gap for you to be able to come and share your story and your opportunity to engage with us, so I say thank you. I want to throw one question at you though. You said that we have to engage, we have to listen, and I appreciate that. But if I said to you if you can make one change—and you said small changes can be very powerful—what do you think that might be now? If there was an opportunity to make a small change so that we supported and engaged with the Aboriginal community, what do you think that might be if we're looking at a change? I know that you said listening and engaging, but if you had a wish list of "If you could do this, that'd be what I'd be after", what would it be?

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** Family. I'd talk to family first. Because that's the deal right there. What you've done is broken down the family rules and you've broken down the family law. Respect, dignity, honour—all of those little things. You've broken all that down. Just saying the words, "Eff you. Get away from me. You're not my boss." And it's just little things like that. Go to family. Sit down and listen to what they have to say. Mums and dads. What happened to all the dads, brother? All the dads that I know, they're all drunks. And I love them all, still. They still discipline me, but I love them all. But the mums and the dads are the core people.

If I was to go a little bit deeper, then the nans and the pops are much deeper than that. I took my grandson to Condobolin with his girlfriend. Where did they stay at? Not at her mum and dad's. They stayed at Nan and Pop's place. Because that's the core part to it. If we were to talk about a cultural place, I would say this then. If you were my brother, then you have no authority in disciplining and teaching your children in culture. It was always up to me, because I'm your brother and I have to teach your sons how to be men, and you would do the same for me. It would be your responsibility to look after my boys and girls, not me. If you were to flog my son or my daughter, who is the first place they're going to run to?

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** The mother normally.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** The mother and the father. That's the law that we've had for a long time, but it's been taken away from us, brother. So family is the most important part to start with, and that would be my only answer for that. Family is the number one.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Uncle, for attending here on very short notice.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** It's a great honour just to even sit at this circle, I'll tell you now.

**The CHAIR:** You're going to be provided with a copy of the transcript of today's proceedings for any corrections. The Committee may send you some supplementary questions should they wish to do so. The Committee staff will advise you when those are required to be sent back. Thank you, again, for your attendance and thank you for all the good work you're doing for the community.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I want to thank you for allowing me to sit at your table. It's a great honour. It's like sitting down with a whole lot of Elders and talking to them.

**The CHAIR:** This is the first set of hearings we're having—Bourke and Broken Hill—but we intend to cover the whole State, including some of the areas that you mentioned.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** That's great.

**The CHAIR:** It's an 18-month process; it's not an easy process in terms of time frame, but we want to get to as many stakeholders as possible to be able to inform the Government on recommendations that are coming out from people such as you.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** If you go to Broken Hill next, that's where you'll meet Wilcannia.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you so much for your attendance today.

**PHILLIP SULLIVAN:** I really appreciate it.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**(Short adjournment)**

**Ms PANIA TAHU**, Chairperson, Bourke Community Working Party, sworn and examined

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for attending today. The Committee will be taking photos and videos during the proceedings. If you have any objections to those photos, let us know and we will not do that. There are some formalities to go through. Have you been issued with the Committee's terms of reference?

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Are you comfortable with that?

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have any questions in relation to those terms of reference?

**PANIA TAHU:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have any questions for us before we commence?

**PANIA TAHU:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Would you like to make a statement?

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes. My father is Māori and my mother is Aboriginal. This is my mother's country. My grandfather actually came from Kinchela Boys Home, so we originate in Wilcannia and Broken Hill. He is from Kinchela Boys and made his way back to Bourke and born and bred his family here, so generations of us are here. I have grown up here most of my life. I have children, and now I have grandchildren that are here. I am also the Bourke Community Working Party Chairperson. The Community Working Parties were set up over 20 years as a voice for our communities. We meet with a lot of the bigwigs within the organisations to discuss issues or how they are delivering their services without our communities. By having a look at the terms of reference, I thought I should mention that over a year ago I was a youth justice conference convenor here in Bourke as well. I can pretty much touch on a lot of that stuff there in them terms of reference. I am very passionate about my community. I am very passionate about education and awareness around anything that can help my people within this community. It's not very useful talking about myself.

**The CHAIR:** Does your community work with other organisations within Bourke, like Maranguka and the other programs that are part of that?

**PANIA TAHU:** The Community Working Party?

**The CHAIR:** Yes.

**PANIA TAHU:** When we talk about Maranguka and the Tribal Council, that has actually come out of the Community Working Party. The Community Working Party has been asleep for a little while. I am just waking it up. We have sort of had a duplication and the Tribal Council has come out of the Community Working Party. In what you are saying, yes, it's more of the high-level stuff, of what they are doing for our people and the funds that they have, and how are they delivering those services, and for us to have input into how they do deliver within our communities. There are 16 chairs. We come from Walgett right down to the Wentworth Shire.

**The CHAIR:** Is your Community Working Party government funded?

**PANIA TAHU:** No.

**The CHAIR:** You rely on volunteers?

**PANIA TAHU:** We're like volunteers. I don't even get paid for it.

**The CHAIR:** What sort of programs do you run?

**PANIA TAHU:** We don't run programs.

**The CHAIR:** So you just oversee those that run the programs, like Maranguka and others?

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes, your Birrangs and your CatholicCares. I suppose it boils down to the issues that all the individual communities are dealing with as well. We meet with executive directors of your Departments of Education and so forth.

**The CHAIR:** You know this inquiry is about looking at the diversionary programs or the causes of why youth engage in the criminal justice system. Do you have any views on what needs to be done to help the youth not to be involved in the criminal justice system?

**PANIA TAHU:** This has been going on ever since I was a kid. Nothing has changed. A lot of it has got to do with time and the time of the day. Services can only cater to the people's needs from nine to five. Crime happens after that. There has been a lot of discussion in this community around how we can work with that, in the sense of having people on the ground, and people changing their hours so they can work at night-time from two to 12, instead of nine to five, so to speak. There has been a lot of conversation around that, but nothing has come to fruition. I just don't see as many things like when I was a kid. We had Koinonia here. They're a Christian mob. They used to take us out there and we used to bash the bunnies, because there are so many bunnies. The point of my story is this: We used to all come back tired and we used to go home and go to bed.

It's hard. A lot of it has got to do with parents' responsibilities. That plays a big part. There are also a lot of services within my community that receive funding for us that are servicing the same people, and nothing is changing, which I'm finding overwhelming. I can't pinpoint exactly in time when the good things were happening, but when we do have good things, they always seem to take those good things away. The new things that we come up with are just not working. A lot of our communities work in silo. When that happens, that's not a good thing either—when we don't work together. Coming back to that, the crime is happening in the middle of the night. It's boiling down to sheer boredom. The reason I know that is because I asked these kids.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Thank you for being here and for what you've just said. You talked about services not being available when crime happens. Obviously, you're talking about at night-time. What type of services are you talking about?

**PANIA TAHU:** You have your Maranguka, your Birrang, your CatholicCare, which are always meeting.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** What would happen? The kids would go where?

**PANIA TAHU:** We have our PCYC, but that's only limited. Not all of the children go there. I'm going to talk about the cohort that you want to talk about. They're not attending that. It's just the other children that do. Realistically, they're not attending anything—this particular cohort—at night. We've had the granny patrol trying to do their thing. We're taking them home, but they're coming back uptown.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** What would you do? What would you set up? In an ideal world, what would you have for this cohort?

**PANIA TAHU:** My ideal world comes back to the home. It's the parents. My people are caught up in generational cycles out here. It's just constant. We need to break that cycle. We need to be teaching them—I'm just going to say it—how to be parents, because a lot of us don't know how to be parents. What we've been taught is what we know. Especially if you don't step outside of this levee bank and go and see what's in this big world or have an open mind to change, it doesn't happen. I believe it boils back down to those basic things. A parent doesn't even go to their children's school things or anything like that. They're minor things compared to these massive things that we're speaking about.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** The more we talk, the more we focus on the family life, and there's dysfunction or it's not working. There are issues, and that's the generational cycles of abuse, poverty, alcoholism and all kinds of different things. If the kids are, say, going to the PCYC or going somewhere else, it gets to midnight and it closes, what could we have open? Where would the kids be happy to go rather than doing crime? Would there be a centre? Do you have any ideas?

**PANIA TAHU:** A lot of us in the community go to certain places and we don't go to other places. That's the hard part here. Back in my day, we had a shed down the bottom end of my community here, which was called the Widjeri hall. That was a place where we gathered. We gathered there for a variety of things, and that was a safe place for all of us blackfellas in this town.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** So something like that. They're obviously not safe at home, and they don't want to be at home. That's why they're out on the street a lot of the time. A place like that is what you're thinking or—

**PANIA TAHU:** The biggest thing here for me, with this particular group that I'm talking to you about here right now, is that you need to talk to the youth. You need to talk to the source to get the answers because, as community leaders, community people, grassroots people—X, Y, Z—we can tell you everything that we see, what we're engaged with, and X, Y and Z. But unless you talk to those kids to get the honest truth, to get to the core of exactly what you fellas are doing here right now, there's not going to be any change. I'm sorry, but there's not going to be any change. That's the group. I'm a bit overwhelmed by that. I'm going to be honest here with you all. I'm pretty overwhelmed with how you are conducting this at the moment, because the people who you have brought in—great. But I believe your core group are the parents, the grandparents, and the youth who engage this

on a daily basis, so they're the people that you should be talking to in order to be sending all this up to the big fellas up there to make change for us here, otherwise they're not going to get anywhere. I just need to be honest about that.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** That's good feedback. Thank you for that. This is obviously the first day of a hearing. We've got 18 months to go. You're the very first. I'm not talking for everyone else, but that's exactly the type of guidance we need.

**PANIA TAHU:** I'm really overwhelmed by it.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** You shouldn't be. We don't bite. We're pretty normal most of the time.

**PANIA TAHU:** But as in how that's been set up here, I'm very overwhelmed by it. It's just that all your answers sit and lay within that group.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** We've only been here 24 hours and we're finding more and more that that's the focus. If you had asked us a week ago, we would have had different views of what it might be. The evidence that people like yourself are giving us gives us that direction.

**PANIA TAHU:** Just coming back to you now, this is the other thing: It shouldn't be the problem of the services overnight when these kids are doing these crimes. That's the parents. They should be held accountable for this. That's where the difference lays here, too. You just can't go catering for people at two or three in the morning. That's what happens here. And the biggest thing is drugs. I've got kids here—eight years old, smoking marijuana, sitting on our corner, stoned out of their brains, just wanting to munch out on the corner. In saying that, the parents encourage this and allow that. Drugs are a very big thing here in Bourke at the moment, when it comes right down to our little babies who you are talking about.

**The CHAIR:** What type of drugs?

**PANIA TAHU:** Marijuana. I question the kids around all these things. Your teenagers are bringing in the little fellas and teaching them how to do it. That's impacting them. You're all aware what drugs do. They're so tiny and chemical imbalance and all this X, Y and Z. That's an issue there within itself.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Growing minds, growing bodies and all those drugs. Are there any other types of drugs? Is there methamphetamine, for example?

**PANIA TAHU:** We have ice. We have heroin. What else is there? That's the main drug in town at the moment.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** You were talking about the parents and the focus on the family life and dysfunction. Is there some strategy that we can use apart from talking to them? I think that's a great idea, but do you see a strategy we can use? Are there things we can do to convince those parents to or make those parents have more responsibility?

**PANIA TAHU:** We're so caught up in drugs and alcohol out here. The minds are just not with it. It's so sad. It's just encouraging them to be a part of their children's days, their lives. Even as the youth justice convener, trying to get the parents to attend with them was hard. It's a bit sad out here at the moment. For me, the schools, too, have a bit of accountability here around education, around drugs and alcohol, right down to sex, because we have kids out here having kids at 13 or 14. We just need to be doing things—not hitting them at year 11 and 12. I'm talking about year 7.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Early on.

**PANIA TAHU:** The facts of life. What it is, what's happened and drilling them with it.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Thank you so much for being here. Thank you so much for your honesty. You said we need to talk to the youth. We need to talk to the parents. Coming off the back of what Hugh was saying before, what advice would you give us? What questions would you see us connecting with them?

**PANIA TAHU:** I suppose, you know, all of us here, the law, the police, the police engagement, right through their supports with Juvenile Justice, the solicitors, even the judge—even that's a bit overwhelming, the release. I'm not here wanting every kid incarcerated or anything like that, and I'm not encouraging that, but at the end of the day, being a youth justice conference convener, I'm getting the same kids constantly. Nothing was happening with that, and it was just that they just kept on coming through and coming through and coming through, and it's frustrating. It's just giving them a safe space to open up to you about what it is that you want to know at the end of the day.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** When you say the parents don't go to the school to attend things at the school for their children, why do you think that is?

**PANIA TAHU:** I suppose things like, you just—I don't know. I suppose because it never happened to us. It's this generational cycle stuff I'm talking about. Our parents never did that with us, so, you know, we don't do that with our kids. It comes back to what I said earlier: We only know what we've been taught.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Thanks for being so up-front about things. What is the engagement with police like in your view?

**PANIA TAHU:** Zero.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** What was that?

**PANIA TAHU:** Zero.

**The CHAIR:** Zero engagement with the police.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Why is that?

**PANIA TAHU:** I think the biggest problem is this: They're sending all the rookies who come straight out of the academy straight out here to a remote community, and they're so overwhelmed. These people coming out here who've lived in a city, a lot of them with silver spoons and forks in their mouths, coming out here and then looking at us like, wow! They come out here, and I don't know if they come out here with a set thing, or if they've got a group that talks about things, or anything like that, but that's just how it is, and sad, because we have no relationship as it is, and that's what needs to happen here. The police need to build the relationship with us.

Now we could talk about PACC [Police Aboriginal Consultative Committee] meetings. PACC meetings are Aboriginal community meetings. They don't even have them properly here. They're not being advertised properly. My people, the grassroots people, aren't attending these meetings. I've attended some of them, but when you get there, the biggest problem is this: We think that's a place where we can talk about our issues, but it's not. It's what they want to talk about, and what they can do for us. I've been to a couple, but when we talk about the grassroots people, none of them are going there, so we're not resolving nothing. Then I'm thinking: Wait there, you've been doing these for how long and no-one's coming? Don't we need some sort of change here to make that happen?

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** How do you think we can better engage with young people in those communities? I know that we can get them to come in, but what's your view on how we better engage with them to understand what they see as the needs for this community?

**PANIA TAHU:** It's about you having the right people here within this community who will deal with these children, and who are going to have those conversations to prep them up before you come here, to bring them into this room, to have those conversations. Because I will say this: I have spoken to a couple of those boys and a couple of them did want to come with me, but when I started talking about cameras and things, they were like, "Nah, I'm not coming." I wanted to bring those kids who are constantly in the cycle, so that you could hear exactly how they feel and what's happening with them.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Granny Patrol. Tell me how that works?

**PANIA TAHU:** Maranguka has been doing that of late. That's just a bus, five or six o'clock that runs to about midnight and just takes them all home.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** It picks up kids walking around?

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes, and takes them home.

**The CHAIR:** How many days a week is that?

**PANIA TAHU:** I'm not too sure at the moment. I'm sort of not in the loop with that particular question that you asking me, but I do know it exists, because they've got the snacks in the car, truck, or bus for them to give them a little feed and a drink and that sort of stuff.

**Mr TRI VO:** Thank you, Ms Pania Tahu, for coming today and for providing your comments. A lot of the witnesses have said it comes down to family issues. Even you said that these services are from nine to four or five, and then after that they return to their own problems. Your suggestion is for us to speak to the families and children, but we cannot speak to all of the families and the children. Where should we go? For other communities, we would talk to the Elders. The Elders represent the people and country. But in this case, you said the families and the children, so who are the representatives of these people? We can't talk to every family and every child.

**PANIA TAHU:** For me, I'd only grab like five or six parents with their kids, and I'm talking about the people who are doing the crime in this community on a constant basis, who are coming back and forth from Dubbo in that justice system. That's your key group, I believe.

**Mr TRI VO:** So pretty much there is a group of people who are repeat offenders—

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** —and then try to help them. There are people saying that if we impose the laws, it may not work. We can talk to them, but what are things that can help them? Should there be an Aboriginal liaison officer or should we bring an Elder to come along who understands your culture and the Australian culture? Do you think those things would help, and then through communication we might be able to find more solutions?

**PANIA TAHU:** Sorry, I'm just trying to comprehend what you're saying.

**Mr TRI VO:** That's okay. Take your time.

**PANIA TAHU:** Can you repeat that please, Mr Tri Vo?

**The CHAIR:** He's asking if you had an Aboriginal Liaison Officer communicating with those young people, would that be better?

**PANIA TAHU:** We have got one, and no.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Does it work?

**PANIA TAHU:** No. We had two.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Why doesn't it work?

**PANIA TAHU:** The female who grew up here was non-Aboriginal, and claimed her Aboriginality as an adult. The reason I know that is because I went to school with her. Old mate who is sitting in the job there now has never engaged us in this community. That's the problem.

**Mr TRI VO:** Do you think maybe it is a selection criteria; we should put more time and effort in selecting the right people who know the culture and the people, liaison officers who know more about the issues and the culture? Do you think that might help?

**PANIA TAHU:** No, because I just said we don't even interact with the Aboriginal Liaison Officer here at the moment—none of us. That would not work. As in the police Aboriginal Liaison Officer, that's who you're talking about?

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** Yes.

**PANIA TAHU:** No.

**Mr TRI VO:** What do you think would help then?

**PANIA TAHU:** Help?

**The CHAIR:** Is it a personality issue or is it that the position doesn't work regardless of who is in it?

**PANIA TAHU:** He just doesn't interact with us. He doesn't get out in the community. We don't even know what his role is. They've changed. When I was a kid, the ACLOs were out with us all the time, us kids, when I was a young girl here. That has changed, and I think their roles have changed, but then nobody advises us or informs us of that either. No-one liaises with him.

**Mr TRI VO:** Maybe if these liaison officers get more training about the issues?

**PANIA TAHU:** He comes from here. He was born and bred here in the town.

**Mr TRI VO:** Training more about the issues, the town, the area and the history and how to go out there and talk to you more and reach out to you more, do you think that might help?

**PANIA TAHU:** If you're talking about the same bloke that I'm talking about down there now, no, because he's actually a local. He comes from here.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** So if we stop talking about him, and I think where Tri is going, if we were going to create a new role, within the police, for example, what would that person do? What would their role be?

**PANIA TAHU:** They'd need be a grassroots person who is very engaged within this community, for a start.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** And that would be part of their core. Would they be recruited locally as well?

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Yes, so they're part of the tribal knowledge, but they need to be an outreach. You mentioned before how it used to be years ago when you were a kid.

**PANIA TAHU:** Uncle Phillip who you just had in here was one. He'd pick us up, take us home, interact with us when we were just sitting around in the park, yarn, that sort of stuff.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Build the relationship.

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes, and we had trust then with them.

**Mr TRI VO:** Thank you for that. Building relationships, reaching out and trust and engaging.

**PANIA TAHU:** Yes. You just want to see that regular face all the time and build that trust up with that particular person, because we don't have much trust.

**The CHAIR:** Ms Tahu, Thank you very much for appearing before the Committee today. You'll be sent a transcript of the evidence that you've given for any corrections that you might want to make. The Committee may have some supplementary questions that they might send to you to answer, but they'll give you instructions on how to send back those answers to those questions.

**PANIA TAHU:** Can I say one more thing?

**The CHAIR:** Sure, absolutely.

**PANIA TAHU:** What I really believe needs to happen here with the police and so forth is that we need to have a really, really good cultural awareness package for these people. I'm not talking about going out here to Mount Gunderbooka out here, or taking them over here to teach them to make a boomerang. I'm talking about—because, for me, I've lived around the traps. I've moved around. So I've engaged a lot of people in my life. It boils down to—where am I going? I lost myself for a sec. People want to know how to interact with us. It's like we're aliens. Sorry, I have to use that word, because I feel like that sometimes. But that's what they want to know, and that's what we've got to give them in order for them to understand us appropriately.

They need to be, when they come into these small communities—these Area Commanders and the AC Liaison need to be held accountable for this. Take them into the community, introduce us. Because guess what? They've got to live here for the next three years with us. So why don't you make it a pleasant stay and get to know the mob while you're here? Because, you know what, stop tarnishing us all with the one brush. Because guess what? There is a couple of good fellas amongst us.

**The CHAIR:** Your feedback will be made available to the police. We had a meeting with the police this morning. We raised some of the concerns that were raised through stakeholders, so we're hoping that the police will take those comments on board.

**PANIA TAHU:** I'm happy to be a part of that too, just saying.

**The CHAIR:** Thanks very much for your attendance, and I wish you all the best.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**(Luncheon adjournment)**



**Ms REBECCA ANTONIOU**, Manager, Bourke Community Corrections Office, affirmed and examined

**Ms SAMARA MILGATE**, Caseworker, Bourke Youth Justice Community Office, affirmed and examined

**Ms VIVIANNE PRINCE**, Caseworker, Bourke Youth Justice Community Office, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** Thank you for appearing before the Committee today to give evidence. Please note that the Committee will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. If you have any objections to those, please let us know. Have you all been issued with the terms of reference for this inquiry?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Yes.

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Yes.

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have any questions about those terms of reference?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** No.

**SAMARA MILGATE:** No.

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** No.

**The CHAIR:** Would all of you like to make a short opening statement?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Firstly, I'd just like to acknowledge the traditional owners, the Ngemba people, of the lands where we work and live, and also pay my respects to Elders past, present and future, and everybody that's in this room today. Youth Justice would like to thank the Committee for allowing us to have input today to this inquiry because I think it's much needed. Like I said, my name is Vivianne and I'm a local girl here. I've been employed with the Far West team as an Aboriginal caseworker for about 18 months now. I've enjoyed every minute of it. We've got an experienced team that are open-minded and that are passionate about the work that we do. Before my employment I had a range of different roles within the community that over the years have allowed me to witness and experience these life encounters that some of our community members have endured, whether that be negative or positive. I'll be honest with all my responses because we all want to live in a safe, happy, thriving community.

**The CHAIR:** Rebecca, do you have an opening statement?

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** No.

**The CHAIR:** The format of this inquiry is you'll be asked some questions from Committee members, and those questions and your responses will form part of the inquiry report that will eventually go to the Government with recommendations. I will start with Youth Justice. What hours do you operate for the youth? Can you give us an outline of what exactly your day looks like or what your program looks like?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** As caseworkers, we can start from nine to five. We do seven-hour days. There is a little bit of flexibility in the hours, give or take half an hour or an hour afterwards. We get allocated a case load of clients that are court mandated, either on supervision bonds or good behaviour bonds. We work with them. We conduct assessments to the level of risk, and develop with the young people case plans to work on some of the identified issues, to build their capacity, to stop them from reoffending, and on their needs.

**The CHAIR:** Have your clients been in custody and are released or do you capture clients before they go into custody, and they're referred to you as problem youth to work with them to stop them from going into the justice system? Does it do both?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** We do both.

**SAMARA MILGATE:** It depends on their court outcome. We could have a young person who is very new to the court system that gets a supervised order. Obviously, if they reoffend, the chances are they'll go into custody or serve their time in community. And then we've got the youth justice conferencing referrals as well, through the court. We see a lot of the younger kids get those in the court. The other aspect of our roles is we do the bail support. For any young person in custody, over the weekend or after hours, we go in and do the bail intake form. It's a report to the court with any risks that a young person may have. We do a bit of a history on their criminal history. It gives the court an outline of the young person. We also do a support plan if they're applying for bail—where they want to live, what they're going to do, and how we're going to assist this young person—or do a referral to the relevant services in the community.

**The CHAIR:** We've heard from prior evidence that kids have broken homes. When they end up in correctional facilities and are released, they're taken back to those broken homes and the cycle continues. Are there any programs that you work with to break that cycle so that the kids who are released from correctional facilities don't end up going back to the broken home? Are there any other facilities or programs that Youth Justice looks into?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** The programs that we work with the kids on are offence-focused intervention programs. We have culturally based programs, like My Journey, My Life, for Aboriginal men, to address violence within relationships. Youth Justice has designed with the Reiby Youth Justice Centre and the Elders in the community a similar program but to work with females, because we have more females coming through as well. That's called Yinnar. There are other programs around substance misuse, X-Roads. There has been an Aboriginal-specific program now, Dthina Yuwali. We do programs around CHART. That's Changing Habits and Reaching Targets. They're about problem solving, and changing the thinking pattern within the young person. There are other programs, like Act Now Together Strong, or ANTS, and then work with specialised services like psychologists. We collaborate with services on the outside as well, within the NGO sector, to try to connect to programs that they offer the young person as well.

**The CHAIR:** My last question is to Corrections. Ms Antoniou, we've heard through prior evidence and through talking to the Tribal Council that the best education kids are getting is while they're in Corrections. When they leave Corrections, all of that education they've received is not recognised and not used, so they start from scratch again. Can you make comments on what we've been advised in relation to that?

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** Any qualifications that they complete are statewide, as far as TAFE courses and so forth are concerned, so they should be recognised by any place, whether it's their white card, or whatever they were getting while they were in custody, because it's accredited training. It should be recognised by anyone, as long as they have their certificates. Sometimes we've had to chase up people's certificates that weren't sent out in time before they were released from custody.

**The CHAIR:** We've heard that, say, for school-aged kids—

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** We don't work with children. We only work with 18-plus.

**The CHAIR:** My question to you was relating to under 18-year-olds, but that's not your area?

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** No.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Thank you all for being here and thank you for the work you're doing. I know it's a hard ride, the work you do. Could you talk me through if an under 18 child gets arrested and charged, what's the process then? What happens to them in Bourke?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** The police or the solicitors give us a call if there's a young person in custody. We attend the police station and do the bail intake form and gather the facts from the police. We then assist them. If the young person is given bail, we then assist them with their future court dates. We collect them for court, take them to court, and support them in the courtroom. It depends on whether they plead guilty or not. We then offer support before their sentence. Then, once they're found guilty or not guilty, Youth Justice get a background report on the young person, which is a detailed report about the young person, their family and living circumstances, some information around why they did the offences, and their education and recreation. So we put things in there about their schooling, or if they're employed, or anything that they've done. For a lot of the kids in custody, their education and recreation reports are really good, because obviously in custody they do their courses and attend school. Then, once there's an outcome from court, if it's a supervised order, we continue the support. If it's not—nine times out of 10 we see them in the community. We are seeing a lot of kids under 12—doli matters—for which we do a lot of bail support.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Has there been an increase in that, do you think?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Yes. We see a lot of kids come through with doli incapax that we're supporting now on bail support, getting them to court, and making sure they're okay.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** I'll break it up. For those children or youth who plead not guilty and are given bail, what we're finding from the evidence that has been before us is that they often come from dysfunctional families. What happens to them? Do they go back to that home? Or is there anywhere else they can go? What happens, if you do the assessment?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** It depends. If the young person reoffends, the court can take into consideration putting them back into that environment. A lot of the kids will then put another address down. We've had kids in

Bourke who go to Dubbo or Orange, to family members. But it's still the same issue. They are out on bail and commit new offences. What we see is a lot of our young people prefer custody than their home life.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** The young people prefer custody?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Yes. And we have those conversations while they're in custody, around other places that they can go. We work closely with MAC River, the rehab centre in Dubbo. We see a lot of our kids go through their program. A lot of our kids don't want to come home.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** We have changed the legislation recently regarding the refusal of bail for certain types of offences. Can you comment on that? Have you seen that working at all?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** We have seen a lot of our regulars go through that. For one young person, for example, it was a bit of a shock to him that he was getting away with it—or not getting away with it. He knew the system: He could get locked up, he'd be given bail and get back out and do the same thing. Now that they're 14, we've got a couple of kids in custody that—

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Do you see it as a positive or a negative? Can you make a comment?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** I think it's a positive. We don't like seeing young people locked up, but it's a bit of accountability as well.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** If they are refused bail—we've had the kids who have pled not guilty. If they have pleaded guilty or they are just refused bail, what happens to them in Bourke now, after that?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** If they're refused, they are obviously sent to the Youth Justice centre.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Where is that?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** The closest is Dubbo, which is Orana Youth Justice Centre. If their risk is too high, they are then transferred down to Sydney, Riverina, or Acmena. The case workers in the centre do what we do. We all do the same programs. Obviously, in the centre, they do the schools. The kids, obviously, can go through the Supreme Court if they wish to apply for bail. We do a lot of Supreme Court applications, which is similar to a full background report. It's called an "information to court" report. It's basically our plan on what these young people are going to do if they are released. We are seeing lately that the applications are being refused on kids over the age of 14, with the new section 22C. Some kids want to make the change; other kids want to get back into that environment. They don't want to do anything.

We've seen some successes with some kids. A few of our kids have gained employment. Youth Justice have linked in with REDI.E employment here in Bourke, and we've had two through the program, who are over 18 now. But we've currently got two employed with REDI.E, who are our two high-risk young people in the community. The team at REDI.E talk about building their relationship, trust, and understanding while being in the work yard. They do maintenance around the community—building and hands-on work. It's just another pathway. Education is not always their priority. It's just another pathway that they can keep themselves occupied with, I suppose.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** What about the younger kids? Going back, you mentioned there was an increase in the doli applications. Do you see a way or an alternative to make things better? I have heard there is an increase in the number of children who are now falling under that scheme, problem or issue. Is there something we can put in place? Is it law changes? Is there a different program? Can you see any ways that we can start reducing those numbers again? It is a bit of a loaded question, I'm sorry.

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Doli is an issue. They know that they have done the wrong thing, and it's very frustrating for the police. They do a lot of work to get their evidence, get the police facts and that kind of stuff. Then to have go through court, court could take up to 12 months on some of these matters. Kids—while they're on bail, it's a struggle. We've seen a lot of kids who just can't cope with being on bail. They can't comply with their bail conditions. It's a recurrence of breaching the bail. We go and change the bail to try to fix that issue but—

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** With the younger ones as well, we talked earlier about the family and the home base. There are a lot of challenges and vulnerabilities within the home base that a lot of our kids face. Then we say that they thrive in juvie because they don't have those challenges in there. It's a more structured, supported environment. But when they're back, they face those challenges again, whether it is couch surfing, or when their next meal is. If it's abuse or whatever they're facing, living within the family and domestic violence environment as well. To support some of those younger people would be more access to, if you could say, cultural therapeutic methods, as well as navigation roles to help them navigate through the service sector in the system, because I think there are a lot of unknowns because of poor numeracy and literacy skills.

There is a history of distrust and let-down as well. Just to form and build those relationships again within—you see services that are doing a great job in the place, that are stepping outside their normal role to build relationships with these kids, but then you have the histories that come back, from the family influence as well, that are then projected onto the younger people. More emergency accommodation—bail support accommodation, whether that's pre- and post. Just an alternative to—getting them to have that feel of what it looks like on the inside so that they don't want to go back or think that it is better in there than what it is out.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Is there any emergency accommodation here now?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** No.

**SAMARA MILGATE:** No.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** There is no emergency accommodation at all. What happens to them? Where do they go?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** If the young person doesn't have any accommodation and they're given bail, they go under section 28: They're placed in custody until we can find them appropriate accommodation. We've seen kids in there for an extended amount of time if the family don't want them or we can't find any suitable placement for them. We have had some kids in Dubbo that have gone to the Orana Support Service, the bail house, but obviously that's only for residents in Dubbo.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** I start with a question for Community Corrections. Does supervised probation for individuals depend on the circumstances of each bail that has been given?

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** For supervised bail, we supervise them for the period of time. It needs to be a minimum of six weeks, but to really be effective it really needs to be a minimum of three months, to give us a chance to actually work with them. Bail supervision is an overlooked option that magistrates and judges have. We've just started it again here. I met with a local magistrate and looked at that as an option. Basically we supervise them at their determined risk of reoffending and their risk to the community. We supervise them regardless of their risk.

We generally suspend lower risk people who are on supervised orders, but with bail supervision we supervise them for the period of time. We work with them during interviews to address their offending behaviour as well as refer them to the necessary services, which could be to deal with their service needs, could be to address their responsivity issues—which, more often than not, is mental health, and often serious mental health issues. We can try to get some stability with their mental health and then start working on, in line with that, their often other criminogenic needs, of their drug use, and sometimes alcohol abuse as well.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Are visits random or set?

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** They are required to attend the office and have home visits undertaken as well, so we go out into the field, too.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Are you guys responsible for the rehabilitation programs as well, or supervising that?

**REBECCA ANTONIOU:** If they have supervised bail to the rehabilitation, or they're on a current order with us, we do continue working with them. If they're at Orana Haven, the one that we cover here, we continue working with them, going out to the rehab when they go out there. Generally, once a fortnight they'll go see them at Orana.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** The kids are sent to the Youth Justice Centre in Dubbo. My understanding is there's only 30 rooms there, anyway. I would presume there are times when it's at capacity. What happens to the kids then?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Orana's based, obviously, on the classification. So give or take, there's normally no more than 20 kids at Orana. That obviously can change over a weekend if there's an influx of kids come in, but the transfers are always happening. There are kids always being transferred to the bigger centres, and we find our girls are transferred straight down to Reiby, in Sydney. It's just a better support down there for the girls that are in custody.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Who gives you the info for those kids who are at risk, for that early identification, so you can have early intervention in the community with the kids who may be perceived at risk?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** We work closely with the police and obviously we attend the Maranguka checking meetings. When they come under our radar is when they attend court, basically, or if there's a bail intake

for them. That's when, really, they're put on notice. Then from that point, once they've been in custody, we support them along the way then. But police are in regular contact with us, even if they're not our kids.

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Through the YAMs [Youth Action Meeting] meeting as well, if they're not with necessarily with us, if they're identified there, Youth Justice has reached out to other services, like the NGOs, government, police, education, and invited them in to do some of our programs as well, so we can do them jointly to try and get to those kids as well before they—

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** We've heard from a few people at schools that the kids don't go back to school. Are you guys involved in that in trying to encourage those children or kids at the end of the day to still go back to get an education?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** We attend the re-entry meetings. Obviously we try to put a plan in place for the kids that are in custody to come back. School in the centre is very different to school on the outside, and the outside education, it's hard for them to understand. They say, "Well, the kids can go to school all day in the centre, but they can't concentrate out here, at school." The school is very supportive but, again, the kids are very complex. If they haven't had the right assessments to be supported at the schools, it can be very challenging for the young people to be in the mainstream schooling. We participate in the re-entry meetings, and picking them up and taking them to school. You know, if there's an issue at the school, we go up. We're close. If there's a young person, that's under us, obviously we engage with education; and if it's not education, it's employment.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Probably from that would be then you guys, I would presume, engage with families as well? We've heard from a number of people that that's sometimes difficult because of the family environment that kids at the moment probably come from, so therefore they're not wanting to be at home, or parents don't necessarily have an interest in those children and what they're doing. Just from your point of view, how is that engagement with families?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** It is challenging. Obviously our main focus is the young person, but it can be challenging if there's a young person in custody, or we're trying to do a background report or a bail report. They're not always forthcoming with the information. They tell us what we want to hear.

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** There is an advantage with Samara and I in the roles as well because we're both local in the community. Our previous employment as well, we dealt a lot with community in a similar way, I would say. It is just those relationships and building that trust, and giving the information up-front and being honest and not making false promises I suppose, and following through.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** I noticed it is here written down, the Youth on Track program. I know it doesn't appear in the Far West or this region. Do you know anything about that program?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** The Youth on Track is in Dubbo and in Sydney. It's not offered out here. We have the CSPs [Casework Support Programs] and JSPs [Joint Support Programs] that are contracted under Mission Australia, and we refer our clients out to them. I do know that Youth on Track now with Youth Justice, they've opened it up to ACCOs [Aboriginal community-controlled organisations] to be able to go and put in for those contracts. I believe in Dubbo an ACCO got the funding under that, and again in Mount Druitt for the Youth on Track. I don't know how far they're in, but I suppose they're into where they've designed the program and they're starting to implement it within the community.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** What I've seen is they seem to have had good success rates from stopping people from reoffending, so I'm just curious if it has been discussed here or not. But it's not here, it's in Dubbo.

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** No. There was a program years ago called Youth Off The Streets. That was a night trial program. That left a big gap in the community when that was removed from the community as well, with the night trial, because there is a lack of after-hours activities and programs available for our young people. Most services cut off at five o'clock, and then we know most crime happens at early hours of the morning.

**Mr TRI VO:** Thank you for attending. Youth justice conferences provided by part 5 of the Young Offenders Act 1997, can you tell us a bit more about that program or youth justice conferences?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** It's a diversionary program from Youth Justice. Sometimes a court will request a referral out to the youth justice conference, to prevent them entering into the court system and getting a mandated order. The youth justice conferences, there is a convenor employed, contracted in. He will meet with the offender, with the victims, the appropriate services, and the police to coordinate a meeting to develop an action plan. That way it makes the offender accountable for what they've done. It gives the chance for the victims to let them know how they feel, and then put in an action plan, so the young person can get their issues addressed and supported. Usually the programs will go for about 12 weeks, and then they're referred out to services within those communities.

**Mr TRI VO:** The family members of the victims and the offenders will be there in the same room with the convenor and the experts?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Yes. Some offences aren't eligible or suitable if they're too serious or high risk as well. That comes into consideration as well.

**Mr TRI VO:** So if it's too serious or it's high risk, it's not recommended?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** No.

**Mr TRI VO:** And do they usually sit in the same room?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** And usually the outcome of it is that an apology is given or there are actions for the victims or other actions to be done in the future. I've heard of the program many times. Do you think the youth justice conferences are useful and successful?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** You have to take it on an individual basis, especially with the young people and their cognitive capacity to understand that as well, and then their connection and relationship with the NGO or the service that then they are referred to, whether they engage or disengage. It becomes difficult when it is not court mandated, because then there's no leverage to make them engage with that program as well. They focus on the RAGE program, where it deals with anger and frustration, peer refusal skills, what the important role of police and hanging around with other associates that are on curfew or after—to apply with your bond. There are a lot of educational components within that as well. But I can't honestly say whether it works for every young person or not. It's on an individual basis.

**Mr TRI VO:** Overall, do you think it's quite successful, quite useful in terms of getting the offender to take responsibility and understand what they've done? Do you think, overall, it's useful? Or you're not quite sure?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** I think to make it stronger—if it was a bit more court mandated, or if there were other options to what services can provide those programs or those intervention initiatives as well to be able to work with the young people.

**Mr TRI VO:** In this hearing, I've heard a lot of problems about how the families are not involved and not supportive. A lot them are broken families and all that. But, with those conferences, are the parents willing to attend and support the offender and victims?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Again, it's on an individual basis. Some of the families that have gone through, especially with the younger children, they've had older siblings that have gone through that process time and again. You see some of the parents, that they're—I wouldn't say that they're not fully supportive. They're, in a way, tied, I suppose. They've got a lot of vulnerabilities themselves in dealing with other challenges that they face within their family home as well. I know that their role is there to support their children, but they're not being supported in some aspects as well, to deal with their own challenges.

**Mr TRI VO:** We've heard in this hearing again that those young offenders come from broken families, with parents who themselves have problems, whether it is drugs or domestic violence or mental issues. Do you think maybe for us to help these young offenders we might have certain things to also help the family or the source of the problem in the family?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Yes, definitely. We all say it starts in the home. We've got strong homes; we've got strong families. If you look at it, there are a lot of family programs within communities. There are some services that have done some great jobs, and there are some families that have gone through and come out better on the other side. There are a lot of families that are still stuck within that system. There are a lot of families that just won't engage. And there is a lot of historical reasons behind that as well. Some of our intervention and prevention family programs, to look at those, and whether the level of risks is where it should be, or should it come down, for that earlier stage? Because some of the families when they reach that level—we've lost them. They're already disengaged. It takes a lot of work. Sometimes it takes 12 months just to get a foot in the door with some of these homes, and then the contracts finish because they'll go for 12 months to two years, and then it's over. Then the next agency comes in.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Thank you Vivianne, Samara and Rebecca for being her today, and for giving up your time and helping us through this inquiry. This is probably to Samara and Vivianne. Attending school in custody is working well. Why do you think that's the case? Why do you think they're getting good results?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** They're supported in custody. Custody schooling—their day is a lot different to on the outside.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Can you unpack that for me?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** It's tailored to the young person. We find a lot of our young children are below the average learning level. Some of our kids in custody are reading at a year 2 or a year 1 level. It's really personalised in custody. There is a lot of one on one at their levels of need. The structure of the day as well is a bit different. They obviously get TAFE in and just do their courses. There's a lot of hands-on work. I know at Orana they do a barista school, so they learn how to make coffee and milkshakes, and that kind of stuff. That's a job for them in the morning, that they have to serve the centre, with their cafe. At the moment they're doing a vetting clinic where they have to care for the animals. That's just another program within the school.

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** I think just the challenges outside, in the family home again, which then gets in the way of them being able to get up and be ready for school the following day as well.

**SAMARA MILGATE:** But also they've got to go to school in custody. If you don't go to school, you work. Once they are back out of custody, they know they don't have to go to school.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Do you think that a lot of them, once they've come out of custody, want to go back and may reoffend for that reason?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Yes.

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Yes.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** We've had a bit of discussion around the challenges that families face. Vivianne, you used the term "the family home needs to be strong for them".

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Yes.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Do you think with all the programs that are being run, ultimately, at the end of the day, if the family home is not strong, it's not going to work?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** I think it will make a big impact on whether that child does succeed, I suppose.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Does what, sorry?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Does go on further in life, to be able to transition into the community without having the experience of being in and out of custody, or coming under the court system. The family structure at home with that support, we've heard it from mental health staff that, without that family support, the referrals into mental health aren't successful because the child will just not attend. We've got three to four generations of non-employment in the home. So, to then expect a child to get up and go to work five days a week full time, it's impossible. They're not conditioned, or they haven't had those role models to be able to copy and support them through that process. Waking up the next day and being able to go out into community, go out to attend school, engage at a standard that the community expects, not having those challenges the night before, of overcrowding or parties, being exposed to drugs and alcohol or abuse. There are a lot of factors that come into play within some of these homes. A lot of loss and grief in homes as well and there's a lot of—sorry, there's loss as well, when there's a death—those emotions, and then what happens in communities after that. Sometimes there's a spike and there's a spiral.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** With the programs in place, the community organisations that work together here locally, do you work with them as well? Do you work with PCYC, do you work with Maranguka?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Yes.

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Yes.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Great. If one of the kids is put in custody, are Maranguka and PCYC able to continue to see them and have those relationships with them whilst they're in custody?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Yes. We've had PCYC attend Orana Youth Justice to continue that engagement with a couple of the kids. The SOS program we have at Maranguka, they can always pick up the phone and ring. We try to do a case plan prior to the young person being released to put supports in place. Obviously PCYC and Maranguka are at the forefront.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** They're part of that plan once the young person leaves custody.

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Yes.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** If they don't have a strong family home, then by continuing that support at a local level gives them more chance to be able to see the difference of what they could have. Is that fair to say?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** Yes, it is. Some will take up the opportunity, reach out, ask for that support and engage. Some, if I could say, could be too ashamed. They're embarrassed within their culture to ask for help. And then there's a mentality in the community with their peer association as well. It's like a second family group within the communities. A lot of them will go along if their peers will go along.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** I have one last question. How often are the YAM meetings held?

**VIVIANNE PRINCE:** They're monthly.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Sorry, I did say that was my last question. Are there workforce issues or staffing issues? Are you sufficiently resourced?

**SAMARA MILGATE:** Within our team in Bourke, we are. There is a need for youth workers in the centre but, at the moment, it's pretty good. We've got a full team with us in the Far West.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** No further questions, Chair.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, ladies, for appearing before the Committee to give evidence. Copies of the transcript of today's proceedings will be sent out to you for corrections. The Committee may send you supplementary questions, if you could return those back. The Committee staff will give you directions for those. Once again, on behalf of the Committee, I thank you for your attendance.

**(The witnesses withdrew.)**



**Mr MAXIME NINA**, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Maranguka Ltd, affirmed and examined

**The CHAIR:** We welcome our next witness. Thank you for attending the formal hearing today. I know we've had some discussions yesterday, but today we would like some of those discussions on the record for the formal hearing. The Committee will be taking photos and videos during the hearing. If you have any objections to photos or videos being taken, please let us know. Could you also confirm that you have been issued with the terms of reference for this inquiry?

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes, I have.

**The CHAIR:** Do you have an opening statement that you would like to make to the Committee?

**MAXIME NINA:** First and foremost, I like to thank the Committee for taking the time to come out to Bourke. You would have heard from other people that have given evidence how important it is to come out to Bourke, and to sit amongst us to hear the stories and experiences that are in the community. Bourke is a community where a lot of its story and a lot of the narratives are not controlled by Bourke. It's controlled externally down in Sydney and major cities across Australia. Can I take this opportunity to say that Bourke is a tremendous resilient place. The people here are extremely courageous. They endure through a lot, and they're extremely resourceful. There are a lot of people here that I speak for within my organisation, who do not have this opportunity to speak in front of you. I'm very fortunate and privileged to have this opportunity, but there are so many more people that you don't get to hear from, about the tremendous and tireless work that they do, above and beyond what they're required to. And that's the whole of community. That's not just the NGO sector; that's the government sector. It's everyone.

It's probably important for me to preface that everything that I'm about to say is not an attack on people at all. I think everyone in this community does a lot of work above and beyond. They go out of their way to do it, and they are deeply, deeply passionate people in their chosen professions and careers. I think the biggest limitation or the biggest roadblock is the framework that organisations are having to deal with. That's important so that it's not a personal attack at all.

**The CHAIR:** Yesterday we had a discussion about a program that you were running, going around with your van to collect kids and maybe take them back to school or take them back home. What hours are you running these programs and how many days a week?

**MAXIME NINA:** We're funded for two programs—the SOS program and the Tribal Connect program. The SOS program is currently staffed nine to five. That is an intensive case management program, which also has a component of delivering activities and workshops to youth in the community. Then we also have the Tribal Connect program, which is a program around youth diversion, essentially. The idea is that it's meant to be delivered outside of the regular nine to five hours and during the hours of six to 12.

**The CHAIR:** Is that program being delivered from six to 12?

**MAXIME NINA:** There are current limitations and restrictions with how we can deliver that program. We spoke a bit yesterday around the level of staffing in that program currently. We're only funded for two staff, and from a simple WHS perspective, it doesn't work. You need more staff to provide that type of service in the community.

**The CHAIR:** If you had sufficient staffing, you would be able to deliver that program, from six to midnight?

**MAXIME NINA:** Absolutely.

**The CHAIR:** When we met with the police this morning, they're saying your program stops at 5.00 p.m., basically, and most of the crime happens later on. Police are the only 24-hour operation that's there at that time.

**MAXIME NINA:** Correct.

**The CHAIR:** That's why I wanted to make it clear that, from your limited resourcing, you're not able to deliver that program.

**MAXIME NINA:** We're not able to deliver the program as effectively as we would like to and that the community is deserving of. That is not through lack of trying; it's just simple numbers. I think you would have heard Rozaria, the PCYC manager, speak earlier. For example, the PCYC on a Friday night will have 30, 40 or 50 kids on any given night, but there are upwards of five, six, seven, or up to 10 staff who are there, and with that

ratio, and the ability to manage the kids in that space, to keep them safe and to provide those activities, it's possible. With two people, it's not possible to do the same thing with 40, 50 or 60 kids ranging from six to 18.

**The CHAIR:** For the record, we touched on education yesterday. We understand that school attendance is very low, but we also understood from our prior discussions that there is a lack of communication between the school and Maranguka in terms of notifying you immediately that such and such a kid did not attend school today. Is that factual? Can you comment on that?

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes. The communication between Education, I think, from Maranguka's perspective, could be improved. That is from both sides as well; that is not just one-sided at all. But when it comes to significant issues like school attendance, which I believe is one of the driving factors of youth crime, it could be much better. A simple conversation of, "Hey, these are some kids who are not attending school. How do we support them to get them there?" I think would be tremendously beneficial. You would have heard yesterday from Aunty Liz and her work that she has done with the Department of Education. The ability exists. The relationship does exist there, because Aunty Liz has worked with Education officers to get kids to school and to get families to meetings with the schools. So it is possible.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Thank you, Maxime, for today and for yesterday. The discussions you had with us yesterday were excellent. A couple of hours with community—that was brilliant—and also showing us what Bourke really is and pointing that out to us was important and informative. A lot of the discussions we had yesterday were reconfirmed by the discussions we have had today and the evidence that has come before us. Thank you for that. It is quite enlightening, because it is quite different from what a lot of us expected, especially those of us from the city. Obviously your organisation is very involved in the community. It has a broad range of involvement in all aspects. What do you need? What more do you need to be able to build on that?

We need to make recommendations to government about the way forward. I think we all know there is massive dysfunction in the family unit within the community. We have children not going to school. We have children reoffending. We have issues with legislation regarding missing kids because of doli and things like that. We have all kinds of things going on. To have your organisation more involved to impact on breaking the cycle of youth offending and dysfunction in the family environment, what type of things do you need? We have been told by council that setting up—the words they used—a diversion centre so the kids aren't going into detention but are going into almost a boarding school that is local where they can teach them life skills and to relearn what it means to be a young adult. What do you think? What more can we give you?

**MAXIME NINA:** I think you have to look at what sustains NGOs, and most NGOs are sustained by grants. Some are sustained by philanthropy as well, depending on their relationships. One of the biggest limitations, I believe, for us to do the work that we need to do, or that is required in this community, is the activity requirements of a grant. I understand that it is necessary, from a government's perspective, to say, "We need these things delivered," but sometimes how that translates onto the ground does not provide us the necessary flexibility to actually do the work that we need to do. It's really good for us to go and provide activities and workshops, which I think are tremendously beneficial to the community, but sometimes you need a bit more flexibility than that.

Sometimes you need to almost have—I wouldn't say just a clean slate, "Here you go. Do what you need to do."

That would be of tremendous benefit, because I think the current funding that we would have in some programs is adequate. It does need to obviously increase with CPI [the consumer price index] so that it's actually matching all that other stuff in the background, but we have adequate funding at the base level. In terms of then what we have to do to deliver programs, that can make it a bit difficult in that space there. That's one of the things I would say.

Other things as well—I think trust. It's starting to be accepted that community hold the answers to the issues that they face, and I think it's really backing that. Sometimes there's a level of scepticism when community says, "Hey, we want to do these things; we think this is in the best interest of community," and then we have to try to convince government that this is the right thing to do. You would have seen here from very capable people that they are educated, they're experienced and they have seen things over the many, many years that they've been in the community for. I think there needs to be that support, and that backing, that community does know the solutions to its issues, and community does have the capacity and capabilities to deliver as well.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** We've heard evidence on different things. We see that you are very involved with the local families, local tribal groups, and stuff like that. Obviously DCJ gets quite involved as well, to a point, but there seems to be a bit of a mismatch, or all the resources aren't used 100 per cent as perhaps they

should be. Can you explore that for me—your relationship with DCJ and how you think it could be improved to benefit the community?

**MAXIME NINA:** Once again, I think it's understanding that government agencies work in community and that, if it wasn't for community, there wouldn't be any government. I think there has to be this trust that community initiatives have community's best interests at heart, and that government needs to support these initiatives—not putting up barriers or finding the reasons to not engage—to move forward and collaborate on the solutions. It seems, from my very brief time in Bourke, that the NGO sector and community is always having to do the work, and is always having to set the table for government to come, sit with us, and let us move forward on these issues.

We're having to justify it and say, "This is what we're doing. This is how it's going to benefit." Then, every four years, there's a new cycle that comes through. Every couple of years, when management or the executive management in some of the institutions that are here change, we're re-establishing the relationship—"This is what's been going on." The work at Maranguka isn't new; it's been going on for 10 years. It seems like there's always the reset cycle when it comes to a change of government or a change of leadership in community as well.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** I'm looking more at youth and the issue there, especially for young offenders when maybe they're on bail or when they've had issues. You know those families. DCJ steps in because they have a certain role. I know from what I hear that there's a disjointed relationship there. Can you talk about that a bit?

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes, definitely. Communication could be improved. You would have heard just recently that Youth Justice work with Maranguka to let us know what's happening. At the moment, there are kids that are getting locked up that we don't know about. It's not until later down the track, where it might be a question that gets popped up in check-in, of "Has anyone see this person?" "Oh, that person's locked up." That communication could be improved, definitely. Even some of the issues that DCJ might be experiencing, to communicate and be more open with its communication, not in terms of what its assessments are of families—I think that is required to be confidential—but, if it's in terms of how they're engaging, could they be supported to engage to get a better outcome for community, and also for family? I think that could be something that's strengthened and improved, definitely. Is that in line with what you're saying?

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Yes, that's what I was going for.

**Mr TRI VO:** What do you think are the main factors to help reoffenders not to reoffend and to improve community safety in this area of Bourke?

**MAXIME NINA:** I think it starts with how we label children as criminals. Through my past experience working in at Orana Juvenile Justice Centre, the process of institutionalisation starts at a very early age. We dress them up as criminals; we give them the outfit; we give them the incentives. The whole environment is geared to a prison, essentially. I think, if we're serious about fixing these issues, or how do we change that, it is that we stop the labelling of kids as criminals. We stop the processes of institutionalisation, and we actually go about it in a therapeutic manner. The literature shows that locking kids up doesn't work. Putting kids in handcuffs doesn't work. I think that's how you start, at least, to address the issues. If there is—and it has been said that there is—a place for child incarceration or youth incarceration, I would probably say that's at the very extreme end when it comes to community safety. But it needs to be something that is culturally and socially appropriate for youth and that is focused on rehabilitation, not just the lip-service of saying, "This is rehabilitation."

**Mr TRI VO:** I'm not quite sure if this is a question you can answer, but can you tell us more about the Growing our Kids Up Safe, Smart and Strong strategy?

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes. That was a strategy that was developed by Bourke Tribal Council. It is broken down into three—soon to be four—categories: the role of men, early parenting and child care, and eight- to 18-year-olds. Out of those categories, you have the outcomes and indicators which are agreed upon by the Bourke Tribal Council. That is essentially what the Bourke Tribal Council would like to see achieved in the Bourke community.

**Mr TRI VO:** How do you incorporate deep listening into the work you do in the community?

**MAXIME NINA:** I think it's being present and sitting with the community through their experiences. That's how we incorporate deep listening. It's about bringing people's experiences to situations and circumstances, and then helping people and assisting people through whatever they're going through or the experiences that they're going through. Yes, that's how we do it.

**Mr TRI VO:** A lot of times they need someone to listen to them and understand where they are.

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** In this hearing a lot of the issues were around families. That's the beginning of a lot of problems. Even if we were to fix a lot of problems, or have a lot of programs for the youth and the children, after hours or whenever they return home, the problems re-occur. The sources of the problems are still there. Can you tell us more about how strengthening families through support services works to reduce youth crime?

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes. You would have heard quite powerfully from Rozaria earlier this morning that a lot of these issues lie within the family. I think the honest question that has to be asked is, are we prepared to do the necessary work that's required. People on the ground are. Whether or not we're funded or resourced to actually do that type of work is another question, but that's where you've got to start. Families are so broken and fractured in our communities that you've got to help them. I just don't know if government is positioned, sometimes, to do that type of work. It's a very hard one, that one there. A lot more work needs to be done. A lot of one-on-one time needs to be done, but then I guess it also comes down to the business question, of is this financially viable. Is this financially sustainable?

**Mr TRI VO:** I realise a lot of your work is in the youth section, but the source of a lot of the problems is in the families. That's where, in the long term, we need to look at.

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** Otherwise, the problem is just entrenched from one generation to the next and is just a continuation, unless somehow the person breaks out of that cycle.

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes.

**Mr TRI VO:** And breaking out of the cycle is very difficult, too.

**MAXIME NINA:** Extremely difficult.

**Mr TRI VO:** We just have to somehow solve it from the source, hopefully.

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes, and if you look at it, as well, you'll find that women in our community have children young, and there's not a lot of support there. The question then might be what's the education after that, and then what are their employment opportunities outside of that. If families don't have that economic opportunity to engage in work, and to financially provide for their family, you open up a can of worms of what the potential outcomes are in that space. To ask an individual to break a cycle which is intergenerationally entrenched is a very big ask. I guess that's why I just go back to my previous comment, which is there is a lot of work that needs to be done, and work in the families. We can do all the work with youth, and that's really powerful and inspiring work, as you've seen from people who have spoken here beforehand, but the real crux of the problem is in these families. I guess the question for government is, how do you break that egg, or how do you break that to get in there? How do you do that work? How do you get there to do the necessary work in that space?

**Mr TRI VO:** That was meant to be my last question, but since your answer was very good, I have another question.

**MAXIME NINA:** Once again, it goes back to community, and you'll see the barriers that get put up when families have to engage with DCJ, education, the police, and the courts. You have all that history and apprehension of engaging with government. I have workers—you would've met Aunty Liz yesterday, Amanda, Melly, Jamal, Leanne—phenomenal workers who have the ability, because they are trusted by community and because they are from community, to get into these houses. That's why I say community needs to be backed to do this work.

If we're serious about doing this work, it is going to be very, very intense and it is going to be very, very resource heavy, but how much do we care about our communities? I'm a strong believer of some of the outcomes that we experience and see in Bourke here. If this was happening in metropolitan areas and in some of your electorates, there would be riots. There would be absolute riots with the levels of attendance, exposure to violence, abuse, drugs, et cetera that are here in Bourke. But it seems to me that because we're conveniently tucked 900 kilometres away, it's not addressed in the manner that it needs to be addressed.

**Mr TRI VO:** It's not too far for this Committee to travel here. Do you think with government intervention, because of course we have powers of making laws, implementing it through the departments—I know the communities here and yourself have done great work, and you continue to do it—and changing the law and the follow-ups and monitoring the laws and our system, we can do more?

**MAXIME NINA:** That's a good question right there. Can government do more? I think government can always do more. Government is extremely powerful; it is extremely well resourced, so it can always do more.

I think it's the way that it does it. I think how laws are drafted and where they're developed, they're developed in Macquarie Street in Sydney. I don't know how many laws have actually been drafted out in regional communities, or where like serious consultation has been done around issues. Yes, you're informed, absolutely, but then sometimes how does that translate on the ground? I guess that's something that can be better, the way that laws are drafted. You can always improve them, and that's the whole point of laws. They're meant to be drafted, you test them, you trial them. Did that work? No. Reform. Let's keep going forward. That's the whole process of law.

But I think incorporating community a bit more, a bit more community consultation, a bit more involving NGOs into law reform—I think it's a very exclusive realm, law reform, so I think that probably needs to be assessed. How do we make that a bit more accessible? How do we make that a process which community and the wider society feel a part of? I think for some people it's very, very daunting. They don't see how laws can be reformed. I think maybe something government can look at is how they make law reform more accessible, and also appropriate and applicable to regional and remote communities.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Maxime, good to see you again today. Thank you so much for all of your time yesterday and your time again today. I agree with you that Bourke is a resilient place. I haven't been here for very long, but the people are enormously courageous and also passionate, and that includes you. Thanks a lot for everything you do. I have a few questions. The first is you said that the biggest obstacle is the framework. What do you mean by "the framework"?

**MAXIME NINA:** The framework is the policies and procedures of organisations. It's the legislation which creates organisations, and that historically is quite Anglo-Saxon, which is just the reality. We inherited the Westminster system, and that's just the reality of it, so that framework there. Then on top of it, you've got the relationships and the engagements and the experiences of community with these institutions in these areas. So that's the framework. It's the history. It's the policies. It's the procedures. It's the context. All of that.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** You also used the term "culturally appropriate rehabilitation". Can you unpack that and explain that to me?

**MAXIME NINA:** I can say, for example, my experience with Youth Justice was that you have an institution where the upper management, at least at the time I was—was white Anglo-Saxon. A lot of the work—let me start that again. Upper-middle management was white Anglo-Saxon. What is culturally appropriate, what that looks like—it's not putting walls around kids and putting barbed wire fences to keep them in. I think it's getting them out on bush, on country, engaged, immersed, and around people that care for them, that want the best for them, and that are from their community, not 400 kilometres away at Orana or 900 kilometres away at Reiby or—I've forgotten it. The other one near Campbelltown—not Campbelltown, Penrith. It's on the tip of my tongue. How embarrassing. It needs to be something that is local, but also is delivered by people who care for these kids, not just they rock up at a centre and they're just doing their job.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** Beforehand we heard from Bourke Youth Justice. They said that they develop a plan post-custody. You and, say, for example, the PCYC, would have had a long relationship working with some of these youth that may end up in custody. Are you involved in visiting them and maintaining a relationship and trust with those young ones?

**MAXIME NINA:** I personally am not. I know that it was said that that is available, but I think that there are barriers in terms of accessibility with that. I think the intention might be there, but when it comes to actually working and coordinating such interactions, it is extremely difficult. There are a lot of reasons for that. I think sometimes there is the expectation that the NGOs are going to have to facilitate and to drive that, which you do want. You want people that are on the front foot, knocking on the door, "Hey, let us in." But I think also government can make it a little bit easier as well. Something around community engagement, of how do we engage with these communities where these kids are coming from, and how do we support those relationships or those interactions—could be something. Because at the moment we're not. We don't have that ability. We don't have that accessibility. I know PCYC have, but probably not as much as they want to either. I think it's something that's so critical, if we can get into the centres and work with the young people and provide them that support, so when they come out we can really establish that wraparound support and try to minimise the impact of incarceration to these young people.

**Ms MARYANNE STUART:** You said families are so fractured and broken in this community. You spoke about the fact that there is not a lot of support around mums having bubs. That early intervention of running families/parenting courses, do you think that early intervention would help?

**MAXIME NINA:** Absolutely. Education is always the key. We say it is the great unifier of all. If people are educated, they can make informed decisions of what they're actually doing. I think sometimes people don't have the necessary education to make the best informed decisions and then they're a victim to, I guess, their

choices, which weren't made informed. I think early intervention is always the answer. I don't know how many of you are parents, but I don't think I've ever heard of a parent complain about, "I put too much time and effort and attention into my kid." I don't think anyone has ever said that. The more we can invest, the more we can educate. The more attention we give to our youth, the better off we are as a society. I think a mark of a society is how well do you look after your youth, how much do you care for your youth, and also how much do you care for those ones that sit outside the box that don't meet the status quo, that push the boundaries, test the limits.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** I noticed in your submission you had reasons for crime: unemployment, cost of living and COVID. Do you think COVID is a big factor in why we have seen an increase?

Some people here said that it hasn't really changed; it's continued. Would you say that COVID has been an impact on those people in our communities, especially younger people?

**MAXIME NINA:** I think COVID's not just the answer, but I think COVID reinforced a lot of relationships and government's responses. We saw—I think it was only recently—a whole bunch of fines got kicked out by the Supreme Court. I think that's something that reinforced some behaviours, and probably pushed people down a path of crime or reoffending. It did have a part to play. I'm not saying that that's the whole thing at all. But if you're talking about responses to people being out and about, definitely something, yes.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** I think I know the answer already, but with clinical support we've got a lot of fly-in, fly-out services. You've got the wraparound and diversionary programs, you've got things in Dubbo four hours away, you've got the women's detox centre in the Blue Mountains eight hours away. Having diversionary services and wraparound services of that distance is not really going to reach the people on the ground who need it.

**MAXIME NINA:** And not at the critical time when they need it. It's widely accepted that when people are ready to engage, whether it be in detox or any service, you really need to have that starting there and then. If someone has to go eight hours away, but they don't have transport, they can't access it. So how do you do that? I think that's why it's important—location—or at least accessibility, to these places. It's a massive one. Bourke is a community that is impacted by its accessibility to transport. There's a bus that goes Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, I believe; sometimes Monday, and sometimes not. Four hours away to Dubbo is the next major city.

If you don't have a car, good luck. And then as well, the bus back is at two o'clock, and it gets back in at seven o'clock. If you've got to go to a doctor's appointment and the doctor is running late, well you're staying over, or you have to actually stay over. That can be a significant cost to people in our community. There's definitely a need for clinical support. I think we value the fly-in, fly-out service providers that do come to that community. But you also can't beat having these services in your community, and also embedded in your community, that actually have a deep understanding of the issues that are going.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** This may be something you want to take on notice and then maybe come back. But there's also the second part to it, which is identifying that there are cultural sensitivities here as well. If I said to you, what family engagement programs would be appropriate on the ground in a community like Bourke, could you tell me what they would be that would benefit some of those families where we do have families torn apart—families that need support? It's a question. There are cultural sensitivities, but then we always talk about supporting the family. Do you know of programs that are lacking here in this community that would benefit that family relationship?

**MAXIME NINA:** Internally of the families?

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Yes.

**MAXIME NINA:** As in like the NGO would provide a certain program?

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** Yes, correct. If you can't answer, I'd rather you go away and think about it and come back.

**MAXIME NINA:** I don't know of any specific program that could be delivered or that would all of a sudden fix the problem. I think it's a bit concerning when we have to rely on programs to be delivered to rehabilitate or to strengthen families. I think that's a very big concern. Whether or not that is something that an NGO or even government can provide, I think it goes down to what are the day-to-day lived experiences of an individual. If you don't have things like secure accommodation, economic opportunity or prosperity, and social mobility, I think that's when you have some of these issues that can then afflict individuals and then that impacts the outcomes, their choices and their behaviours.

There's a lot of work that needs to be done as society as a whole. It's a very, very complex question. I don't think there's a single program that's all of a sudden going to fix it, nor do I think a specific NGO would be

able to deliver it. But I do say that it can at least be taken on and you can then, I guess, evaluate and measure it. But I think it's also a deeper question of the fabric of society as well.

**Mr PAUL TOOLE:** In your submission, you spoke about government-to-community data sharing and better data sharing. What do you mean by that?

**MAXIME NINA:** An example that I can give to you is that for a long time we've been working with Education to try to share data. That can be around things, for example, like school attendance. If we, as a community, understand school attendance, we are then able to develop programs or an informed response to certain issues. For a long time, schools and Education haven't shared data around attendance, but they have also published in newsletters their attendance data. That is where I could say that it could be improved—a bit more transparency around that, or a little bit more collaboration, in a sense. Things do get shared, but not necessarily the things that need to be shared.

**The CHAIR:** Just on that, if the school was to contact your organisation each morning and say, "The following students didn't attend today", how would that help the system? Would you be able to reach out to them quickly?

**MAXIME NINA:** Yes. I also want to quickly preface that I think the Education department here, with the resources and the complexities of the issues that they have to face, does a tremendous job. Again, I say it's the framework. It's not the individuals; it's the framework that impacts the relationships. If there was more communication, there could be more work done on some of these issues. As I explained to you yesterday, there are two staff that drive around most of the day to pick up kids. That's two people. We have a workforce of 10. That could easily lessen the load and improve the effectiveness of that task. Once again, it empowers community to actually take that role or that responsibility on. I think that a change could be made. You would be able to provide or get to more kids in a shorter amount of time. Simple communication around certain things could bring about drastic changes within our community.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** You made a statement before—and Maryanne picked up on it as well—that girls are having babies at a young age, at 12 or 13.

**MAXIME NINA:** A bit older.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** We talked about the young bubs thing, which is great, but I want to try to get a step before that. Are there any programs targeting female youth in Moree?

**MAXIME NINA:** Not to my knowledge. I guess they're the silent sufferers, you could say. The focus always seems to be on the young males. They're always in the spotlight. They're the ones that are committing crimes. It's always the female youth that seem to go by the wayside. There's nothing, to my understanding, that's specifically targeted at female youth in our community. There has been work that has been done in the past by our female workers, but there's nothing specifically targeting—

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Do you think that's a problem? Do you think there needs to be?

**MAXIME NINA:** As a matter of equality—there always seems to be a focus on young males—absolutely, there needs to be something there. There definitely needs to be something that addresses the issues and the needs of females in our community.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** How many females youths are you seeing offending?

**MAXIME NINA:** I wouldn't be able to tell you straight off the bat.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** A lot more, the same or—

**MAXIME NINA:** From experience, it's a lot more males that are committing offences—at least, those are the ones that get caught. I think the offending patterns would be a bit different from males to females, especially in youth.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** But it's a real gap. There isn't anything for young women?

**MAXIME NINA:** There's no specific programs or services that are targeted to women.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** What about attending school? Are more young females attending school than males?

**MAXIME NINA:** You'd have to ask the department around that. From my experience, females would attend better than males but, also from my experience, some of the people who were impacted the most by truancy were females. For example, you would have males who would miss a day here and there, but you would see females who would miss significant periods of time—and I'm talking about not even rocking up for a term.

**Dr HUGH McDERMOTT:** Is that because the homes are so dysfunctional that they're becoming the carers of those homes?

**MAXIME NINA:** That could play a part, but also I think the experience of women within our society can sometimes get erased or pushed aside and they're not acknowledged. That sometimes can play a part in it.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Max, for yesterday and for appearing before the Committee today. A copy of the transcript from today will be issued to you for corrections, and Committee staff will give you directions on how to return those. If there are any further questions that the Committee might wish to ask you, we'll send those in writing to you so you can respond. You're welcome to stay for afternoon tea and have a chat with Committee members, should you wish to do so. Once again, on behalf of the Committee and staff, thank you very much for your attendance.

**MAXIME NINA:** Thank you for coming to Bourke.

**(The witness withdrew.)**

**The Committee adjourned at 15:30.**