

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

**INQUIRY INTO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE 9 TO 14 IN NEW
SOUTH WALES**

At Casino on Tuesday 5 August 2008

The Committee met at 10.25 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon. C. M. Tebbutt (Chair)

Legislative Council

The Hon. C. E. Cusack
The Hon. K. F. Griffin

Legislative Assembly

Mr S. R. Cansdell
Dr A. D. McDonald

CHAIR: I declare this hearing of the Committee for Children and Young People open. As I am sure you know, we are conducting an inquiry into the needs of children between the ages of 9 and 14 years. This is our first regional hearing. Before we formally commence proceedings, I ask Aunty Nora Caldwell to provide a welcome to country.

Ms CALDWELL: Good morning, everybody. First of all, I would like to introduce myself. My name is Nora Caldwell. I am a Junbung elder and chairperson of the Junbung Youth Advisory Committee. Today I would like to acknowledge my past elders and their ancestors of the Bunjalung nation. I would like to welcome our visitors from Sydney and those around from the organisations that are coming here today to talk to you on behalf of our children. I hope that everything will go well and that we will have an opening here to everything and grasp some good words here today. Thank you very much.

CHAIR: Thank you, Aunty Nora, for your welcome to country and those words of wisdom. I hope that is in fact the case. We will now proceed to the formal roundtable hearing. We have tried to keep today's meeting as informal as possible so that we can hear from you what you believe are the needs of children between the ages of 9 and 14. There are a range of different services represented here. We are also going to visit some services. We are also having a roundtable hearing in Lismore and we will be speaking with some young people in Lismore. We will talk with some parents tonight when we met the representatives from the Parents and Citizens Association. There will be a range of activities over today and tomorrow.

MARGO RUTLEDGE, Community Projects Officer, Kyogle Council, Stratheden Street, Kyogle, and

ELIZABETH SHELLEY, Youth Coordinator, Casino Youth Services, 2/75 Walker Street, Casino, and

NOELINE OLIVE, General Manager, Casino Neighbourhood Centre, 31 Walker Street, Casino, and

LYNNETTE SMITH, Centre Manager, Adult Community Education Inc, North Coast, 33 Walker Street, Casino, and

GRETCHEN YOUNG, General Manager, Mid Richmond Neighbourhood Centre, 5/6 Oaks Street, Evans Head, and

JEFFREY RICHARDSON, Chief Executive Officer, Dharah Girinj Aboriginal Medical Service, 43 Johnston Street, Casino, and

JOANNE PETROVIC, Community Projects Officer, Richmond Valley Council, Cnr Walker Street and Graeme Place, Casino, and

NORA CALDWELL, Chairperson, Junbung Elders, 110 Walker Street, Casino, affirmed and examined:

TONY BUTCHER, Family Support Worker, Casino Family Support Service, 104 Centre Street, Casino, and

PETER BOUGHEY, Uniting Church Minister, Casino, 32 Lakeside Drive, Casino, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: There are some formalities we need to attend to. If we do not, we cannot use the evidence you provide us with in our final report. Have those proceedings been explained to you?

ALL: Yes.

CHAIR: Now that we have been through the formalities we will start the process. The Committee members will introduce themselves to you.

The Hon. KAYEE GRIFFIN: I am Kayee Griffin. I am a member of the New South Wales Legislative Council.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: My name is Catherine Cusack. I am a Liberal Party member of the upper House and I live at Lennox Head.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: I am Steve Cansdell, State member for Clarence.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: I am Andrew Macdonald, State member for Macquarie Fields.

CHAIR: I am Carmel Tebbutt and I am the Chair. Two other Committee members were unable to attend today's hearing. The Committee members will ask you some questions. Given the range of service providers here, we will ask general questions and you can all comment. If you do not wish to comment, that is fine. This is a public hearing and members of the public can come and listen to the hearing. As I indicated, the inquiry is looking at the needs of children and young people between the ages of 9 and 14. One of the reasons the Committee thought this was an important area was because there has been a lot of work done, particularly in recent times, into the needs of young children and early intervention, and teenagers and adolescents have always been subject to a fair amount of attention, good and bad. We felt this middle years group perhaps had not had as much attention focused on them and that their needs may not have been identified. We thought it was particularly worthwhile having a look at them. That is the purpose of the inquiry.

First of all, I will ask what you think the main issues are for children between the ages of 9 and 14 around Casino if you are a Casino services provider or from a neighbouring area. Anything you want to tell us will be valuable for the Committee to gain a better understanding. One of the reasons why we have these regional visits is to get a perspective on the needs of children and young people in regional areas. Most of the witnesses we have heard from so far have been Sydney based or from Newcastle and Wollongong. Does anyone want to start and tell us what they think the main issues are for 9- to 14-year-old children and young people?

Ms YOUNG: Firstly, I welcome the Committee for examining this. There are huge gaps for the 9- to 14-year-olds. I manage an organisation that covers the mid Richmond, which is part of Richmond Valley. We cover the areas of Evans Head, Broadwater, Coraki and surrounding rural areas. There is a large indigenous population within those areas. As I said before, we are in Richmond Valley but are not considered to be a regional centre in any way, shape or form. Services for 9- to 14-year-olds fall into a whole range of services that our organisation auspices but there are huge gaps in terms of funding. They do not fall into a lot of the youth funding we receive, particularly the 9 to 11. Twelve is where our youth service accepts kids. So the 9- to 12-year-olds miss out completely. Supported playgroups from Families NSW funding obviously only go to 5. We auspice a regional Brighter Future program. That cuts out at 8. In terms of any funding we receive, apart from ACE and Federal, 9- to 14-year-olds do not fit into that at all.

The needs of 9- to 14-year-olds that I can say off the top of my head are pretty much around equity issues in terms of transport, sport, education, particularly in rural areas where kids do not have a lot of options that they do in larger centres. What you may find in the rural areas will be quite different. The mid Richmond children have difficulty accessing specialist services. In relation to children with disabilities, our organisation receives some DADHC funding but not specific for children of that age group. There are a lot of difficulties around parents accessing transport to get to appointments. Our schools do not have enough psychologists and counsellors to access those specialist services.

CHAIR: Thank you for that introduction to a range of issues.

Ms OLIVE: I can comment in regard to our services. We are a neighbourhood centre, like Gretchen's. We provide a range of services for the disadvantaged community. For the children's age, what we classify as children, we also have a Brighter Future program which covers Casino and Kyogle, local government area only. That is up to 8, the same as Gretchen's. We do run a vacation care program, which is for 5- to 12-year-olds. That is an operation for 45 children per day. Our issue there is the funding because it is only contribution, so we cannot provide a whole range there. Also, it is very difficult to manage when children attend who have challenging behaviour. We have children with disabilities so we are able to get funding through Commonwealth to provide extra support for them. But there are no other specific services in Casino that identify for those children 9 to 12. Beth is from our youth service and she will be talking about the youth area. We have a family disability support services for children and young people 5 to 18 which covers the mid Richmond, Casino and Kyogle, but transport and isolation is a huge problem in regard to bringing families into the program. That is the area we cover and we do. I agree with the comments that Gretchen made in regard to transport and providing a range of services. We have some funding. We have the after school care program, which is Commonwealth funded, and again it is for children 5 to 12.

CHAIR: Your vacation care program for 5- to 12-year-olds, do you find the children in the upper age group—10, 11, 12—come to the vacation care program or is it mainly the younger children?

Ms OLIVE: Mainly the younger. Those that do attend in the older bracket group have difficulty participating. Though you are offering a particular range of programs for them, they are in the situation where they feel they are not children but they are not teenagers. Parents are finding their behaviour is quite challenging, most of them, especially the young boys. They really do not want to be there because they see it as a childcare centre, which it is in a way. They need more stimulating and different things that are up and above what we can do. There need to be specific programs. We see with the 9 to 12 or 13, parents say to us, "Can't you just run a program for us? We have to go to work, we can't leave our 13-year-old at home." They are not old enough to have no supervision but they do not want to participate in those sorts of activities. We have it quite often where there is that little gap before they can come into the youth service. Our youth service is 13 to 20. So there is that little gap in between. That is where we find a lot of children displaying inappropriate behaviour. I have been the manager for 20 years and we have been running the youth service for about 17. That age group is really escalating the issues for our services where we are providing services to that target group.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: If funding were available what sort of service would you be providing for those children to meet that gap? They are a bit old for art, are they not?

Ms OLIVE: Yes, I think it is sort of a whole range of things. In some ways it is things that youth participate in but more flexible—I think it needs to be a very flexible way that you are actually providing those services so they can move from one thing to another.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: What would the service be like for the kids?

Ms OLIVE: I have not really thought that far. I suppose it needs to be things where, like young people at that age have got a lot of energy so it can be sporting things. A lot of families in Casino do not have the finances or the transport to actually go to other things. So it is also opportunities to go to other things that they cannot participate in here. There are certain things—like we have got skate parks and there seems to be a real interest in that but not everybody likes that. I think it is like mentoring as well. There are a lot of sole parents that have young boys and girls who are displaying inappropriate behaviour at different times. It is very challenging so that mentoring about self-esteem in themselves, and those sorts of programs that build up their confidence and their skills.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Are there any family support services available for families with children with challenging behaviour in that age group?

Ms OLIVE: There is a family support service in Casino. Tony may need to sort of talk about that area. I know they do some works in the schools.

Mr BUTCHER: We have a lot of consistent referrals and inquiries and dealing with children in this age group. Generalist counselling we do. There are some access issues with the child psychologist that is provided through community health so we often pick up a lot of the not so serious cases that he is not able to deal with—he has a waiting list. We try not to have a waiting list so accessibility and availability is there. A lot of the main issues I feel are around family separation that is causing a lot of anxiety, depression. There are a lot of mental health issues that I believe young people have to contend with, and they are not really being addressed.

Something positive recently is that there is a new adolescent mental health unit clinic at the Lismore Base Hospital which has just opened, but prior to that, any kids in that age group were going into an adult mental health facility which was totally inappropriate and I believe that occurs in a lot of other regional areas. That is a concern. I see a lot of young boys with anger issues so I do one-on-one anger management. We do parenting education, group work, community education to assist. Another issue would be our funding. We are only part time. Similarly, Kyogle Family Support is only two days a week. We are four days a week, with only a couple of workers, two days a week each. So there are limits to what we can tackle.

Rev. BOUGHEY: A lot of what I have heard is, it is what I am working on at the moment. I teach a program called Rock and Water. I learnt to be a trainer through Newcastle University and it is done through the schools. It teaches boys how to become men, how to control their anger, how to have self reflection, self-confidence and it is taught in the school.

I teach years 5 to 6 and also year 7 in the high school in Bonalbo. It is the best program I have seen. I wish they had it when I was younger on how to communicate. The reason for the rock and the water is, the rock is immovable. As soon as boys come against a problem they become a rock straight away, and want to fight someone. The water is because it is water. So it is a program that has a lot of physical activity, but also you marry the physical activity with the mental side of rock, and the mental side of water. In other words, when you become a rock mentally your communication stops but when you can be water, communication starts. It is a program that takes them right through. It goes the whole year. There is a lot of physical activity. One school that started before I started reduced its suspension rates of boys by 80 per cent, mainly because it stops bullying. It allows the boys to communicate. It is a great program.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: Do you think conduct disorder or bad behaviour become much worse over the past 20 years? If so, why? What can be done about it?

Ms OLIVE: I think it has. From my point of view it is because of a number of things. I think there are a lot of family breakdowns. Over the years I have seen an increase in substance abuse, domestic violence and all those sorts of things have huge impacts on children when they have been raised in that environment. So children, you were just saying about anger, respond in some instances straight away because that is how they have seen it at home. When something happens you respond by anger or violence and so they do not understand or know a different way because there have not been some role models to show them. A lot of children have been abused physically, emotionally or sexually. I see that has increased over the years. It may be in relation, it is now being more exposed and people are making those reports, where in the past it may have been hidden.

Ms YOUNG: Noelene and I have been colleagues in neighbourhood centre land and certainly have noticed over the past decade that there has been a decrease in early intervention and prevention services. So I think we have all been able to examine families over decades and it is almost intergenerational in terms of the crisis that they reach. I think we are both really happy to see a program such as Brighter Futures being able to examine early intervention and prevention services. What is available for nine to 14 year olds is incredibly limited so, yes, it would be wonderful to be able access services for those families when children are two and three in preference to being nine or 12.

Ms SMITH: We run a program for kids who cannot or will not go to school basically. It tends to be the 12-plus group. The youngest child we have had in the program was 10 and was refused at all schools on the North Coast because of violent behaviour. This child was a dream. We had no problem with this kid whatsoever. We sat down when we started this program with 10 kids who were on the edge of being expelled from school. Within three months that had risen to 49 children because their friends, they brought their friends there because they said "It is not like school".

What we found initially was the first problems were the kids' literacy and numeracy were so low that you had children in year 7 who were only capable of doing year 1 and year 2 work. So you become a behaviour problem. Don't want to be the dumb kid in the class. I'll be the behavioural problem. I will be the class clown, whatever. So we sat down and we tried to address this problem as seriously as we could. One of the first things we did was actually talk to young people involved. One of the things that they complained about was rules—so many rules—rules about this, rules about that. So we sat down and we came up with three simple rules for the program.

The first one was that we respect each other in the program, regardless of race, creed, colour, religion, et cetera. That rule can be used for just about anything you do. You are not respecting somebody in the place but it is a simple rule. The second rule was that we respect the place and the property so we do not damage things in the place. In the 10 years that the program has run we have had no damage. We have original equipment that we bought, yet we still have the kids that are considered behavioural problems all over the State. The third rule was we try not to swear. Now we accept that because kids today swear. It is part of their speech pattern. They are not doing it to offend you or to stir you up, it is just the way they talk, because it is the way they are spoken to in the first place.

They were the simple things that you learn from kids. Having said one day to some kids in the program "Why don't you swear at me? I hear you swearing in the street" et cetera. Their simple answer was "I don't swear at you Lynne, because you don't swear at me". It is that easy. When you make it simple you try to make it so that kids feel they belong; that it is their place, they respond accordingly. Young people are good. They are not bad. They are not a problem, they just need to be understood and they need to be respected which we don't seem to do a lot of. If you talk to the young people in this area and ask them what they want, you would be surprised to find that the only thing they want—they do not want to go to the cinema, they do not want to go to Dreamworld or they do not want all those things—is a place they can go to, a place that they can hang out.

Beth runs the Youth Centre that is open from 9.00 to 4.00 Monday to Thursday yet any Friday or Saturday night you drive down the streets of Casino here, you will see kids in groups, not causing trouble but playing cards, but sitting out in the outdoor café in the middle of winter freezing because they have absolutely nowhere to go. We need a youth centre that operates on weekends. We need a youth centre that is staffed with more than one worker. It is unreasonable and unsafe to expect one person to manage these kids. We normally do not operate in the school holidays. One year we operated in the school holidays and we had 108 kids attend the program, and some days we had 60 and 70 kids there in a space that is probably designed to accommodate about 25 comfortably.

Kids do not want a lot of fancy things. They just want a place to go, a place to feel safe, a place where they are respected and a place where they can just be them. They do not particularly want us to organise 107 activities and things to do—art and craft, sport of whatever—they just want to be with their peer group, like we all do.

Mr RICHARDSON: As an Aboriginal man, not of the Bundjalung nation, it is important for me to firstly acknowledge the elders and the traditional owners of this land before I speak, and I thank those people for giving me the opportunity to speak. Having worked in Health for some 15 or 16 years now, we talk of closing the gap and doing lots of marvellous things. Sometimes we are closing the gap but I am afraid it is mainstream

population that is catching up to where Aboriginal population is as diabetes and all those things are continuing on.

I agree with what Lynne says that the children just need somewhere to go to and the most important for them to have to go to is their own home. My belief is it is not a drop-in centre, it is not a children's centre, it is not anything else other than a home. Young people who I work with now—I am trying to inspire them to get ready to go into the work force. Speaking from an Aboriginal perspective, if my family were not able to get work, and probably my grandfather could not get work and my father has not been able to get work, it is very difficult for me as a young fella to understand where I fit into this society.

As a young man in Casino, if I walk around the street, it is very rare that I see an Aboriginal face employed, other than in an Aboriginal organisation. It is extremely hard for me to be proud and to think that I have a future so it affects my behaviour. I have spent hours talking with children about eating the right things. You go into the school and there are little kids there bright with anticipation and they listen to what you say. They have not got control of the shopping trolley. They have not got control of the fridge at home. They eat what is there for them.

So work with the nine to 14-year-olds certainly, but it is the family we need to work with. You cannot have a healthy secure child without a healthy secure family. You cannot have a healthy secure family without a healthy community. You have not got a healthy community when Aboriginal people have not the same access to work. I know as Aboriginal people we have a lot to work on within ourselves, but the opportunity we need to have. There is no reason for me as a young Aboriginal person to stay at school because what job am I going to get? My home country may be Rio, Tabulam, it may be Woodenbong. The chance of me getting a job there is absolutely remote. As a 15-year-old because I am probably more suited to going into a trade, our education system is not designed to hold me and hold my interest.

As a 15-year-old, because I am more probably more suited to go into a trade, the education system is not designed to hold me and hold my interest. I am more likely to go into a hands-on trade of some sort. To get a trade, I will never get it in those sorts of places, so I turn my back on the only life I know and turn my back on my family and go to the city or somewhere to try to get a job, which I will never get in those sorts of places. That is not going to happen for the majority of our people.

Unless the good lessons that I could teach young people at home, if parents start to think about the healthy diet those children need, then I cannot do much for the life of that child. You feel so hypocritical when you go to a community and talk about eating five serves of vegetables a day. In most remote localities I can bet you that the price of fruit and vegetables is a lot higher than in the town. I can also bet you also that the price of cigarettes or a bottle of Coke or those sorts of things will be the same price as in the city. I will bet you that I can buy a Chiko roll cheaper than I can buy bananas. When bananas were short following the cyclone everyone complained about the price of bananas, but they were still cheaper than the price of a Mars bar; but no-one complained about the price of a Mars bar.

Those are the things that the community should start to look at. We want to get community gardens going. I want to get children creating stuff rather than wrecking stuff. We are starting on that in the medical service and we will get there, but it will take us some years. I have to be able to offer those kids a future. When I go to that school and talk about it I say, "You knuckle down and do your study and make yourself employable, I have to then know that mainstream society will employ Aboriginal children, otherwise I am making an empty promise that I cannot keep.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Further to your comments about nutrition and healthy living, there have been programs in that area. Could you point to any research on the outcome of those? Did they work, or not? I refer to Cabbage Tree Island in particular.

Mr RICHARDSON: I can only speak of what we have done in this town, and the region we cover west of Casino. What we have discovered does work is having people like Aunty Nora, or people who have lived this life, to talk to the children. We have our nutritionists and psychologists and we have a whole plethora of health experts. but they do not have the impact of one single Aboriginal person who has lived through dialysis or is currently on dialysis or had a by-pass has who comes to tell their story. We could have a recovering alcoholic come and tell their story. The young people sit and listen and say, "I can do this; there is a future there". For some reason, the health programs—and I have worked with health programs in both black and

white communities—have gone too highbrow. They have lots of fancy ideas, but they are not getting it to where the rubber meets the road.

Recently I was interviewed in Queensland for a director of Aboriginal health position. I missed that position because I wanted to change things. One question I was asked in the interview was: Go to the computer and prepare a response; we have a new Minister for Health and you have 20 minutes to prepare a response for that new Minister and tell him what the problems are in Aboriginal health and how we are going to fix it. I said that it was an insult - anyone who could brief the Minister in 20 minutes on Aboriginal health really should not be in that position. That did not go down very well.

I could sit in my office and see that, at last count, there are at least 30 policies and strategies lining the bookshelves. When I worked in the area health service it was no different. But without the staff and without the support of the community and the families, the strategies just do not bite. If the family's chief concern is how to pay the rent and the registration, how to do all those sorts of things, then the health part just does not come into it. As a manager of a health service I get daily requests for assistance with fuel, for assistance with funerals, for assistance for everything except health. Until the people have the means to live a good and meaningful life they cannot set the example for the nine to 14-year-olds that we are dealing with.

The other thing is, to be able to walk in and be confident about getting a job you need a set of teeth; you need to be able to smile at the world in that respect. Little kids are having full extractions; that is, full extractions in their mouth for the rest of their lives. People think that they are only baby teeth and they will grow back. They do grow back, but the jaw does not grow. It is a disfigurement for the rest of their lives. We have a school dental program that gets some of the kids. I have a dentist here who works two days a week, and we cover from here to Ballina. We are booked out till Christmas.

For a young woman looking for a job who has to hide her smile because of the gaps, where will she get confidence for her inner self, when she is already in the minority, to say, "Hey, I am the best person for this job. I am right here in your face"? That is what we need to do, to get these people the skills to do it.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you support fluoridation?

Mr RICHARDSON: Absolutely.

CHAIR: We will now hear from Margaret.

Ms RUTLEDGE: My point relates to an earlier question about what programs work. I want to tell you about one that works in Kyogle. It is the Kyogle Youth Ventures, a program in which high school students mentor that age group of senior primary school students. They have five or six interactions a year and the main one is a youth camp where they go away for the weekend. It is one of those ropes type of exercise/extreme camps. Apparently the parents report that children who have had incredible social problems, after that time have much more esteem. That is the primary school aged children. They have a lot more focus and a lot more self-restraint in a way. They have also teamed up with high school senior- or even middle-year high school students. So when they go to the high school they already know people, people who they can look up to. It works very well.

Every year that group is struggling for money. They get \$1,000 from council, they hold lamington stalls on the street, they have people knitting beanies. They really struggle to keep that program going, though it is recognised as a very valuable program that has been going for about five years. But they cannot get any funding that has longevity.

Another issue I wanted to talk about is our youth centre. It relates particularly to the indigenous young people who go to the youth centre. That cut-off time of their age group is 12 to 23. In indigenous families it is the older teenage children who are looking after the younger children. They come to the centre but they are not supposed to be inside the centre. There is no insurance that covers that. It is not about programs or their suitability; it is really that the infrastructure is not there to support them. Yes, they let them in. And if they do DOCS says that they should not be doing that. Then those children have nowhere to go. There is no safe place at home. They are on the streets. That makes their lives a lot more dangerous.

CHAIR: Is the name of the organisation "Kyogle Youth Ventures Program", or is it auspiced by someone else?

Ms RUTLEDGE: It is auspiced through the youth centre.

CHAIR: How do they get students to participate in the mentoring program? Is it open for kids to volunteer? Do they pick kids who they know have behavior issues?

Ms RUTLEDGE: Yes, they do. It was pioneered following a really dreadful car accident in which three high school students were killed. It came out of drug and alcohol funding. That was the originator for it. One of the high school teachers has been working very strongly with the mentors. Also they now have a part-time person who is funded to work in that program in the schools. Some people who were mentors in that project were young people at risk who have gone on to really good professions and given them confidence to do that. Also, they target other young people at risk in primary school. They are all at-risk young people, but through the guidance and through the structured program they can work together, giving confidence to the older at-risk, and giving skills to the younger.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: The hours at the youth centre are 9.00 a.m. to 4.00 p.m., Monday to Thursday. Why have you licensed those hours for the centre?

Ms OLIVE: That is at Casino, I can answer that. It is because of funding.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: If you have limited funding are they the best hours to invest funding in?

Ms OLIVE: We do some things. Beth has only just started in the position. We do run some programs in the evenings and some others on weekends. We do those sorts of things on an irregular basis.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You have identified that after-school and weekends are really important, yet the centre seems to operate in school hours.

Ms OLIVE: We just have an office environment, we do not have a centre. We have a youth service, we do not have a youth centre. We have an office space and a space where youth can come and use computers. Beth does a lot of outreach, so she is working with Kerry and others at TAFE and at the high school. So she does counseling and stuff in lunchtime at schools. Also, we work with Evans Head Neighbourhood Centre in youth activity sharing, and we started with Kyogle as well.

Ms SMITH: My criticism was not of the youth centre or the neighbourhood centre. It was of the fact that it is always a funding issue. It always comes back to money and I can practically guarantee that 90 per cent of the people here are working more hours than they are paid for. They are doing things across their programs because the need is there but the money is not.

Ms YOUNG: Can I add that with our youth service it is an OHS issue. Our funding base is so limited, and having a worker outside those areas, apart from the fact that it would not be financially viable when looking at overtime rates, it is solo workers. However, we do partnerships with our youth service. We have a small component of Aboriginal Child, Youth and Family Strategy funds, which is through DOCS communities division. That target group starts at 10, and it is Aboriginal specific. We do some partnership ventures with the Department of Education and Training, particularly Coraki Public School, around groups for Aboriginal-specific young men at Coraki. We employ casual workers for that because our basic youth funding base does not cover that.

Ms OLIVE: Beth is a sole worker, and that is why she is working with whatever is available.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: I am not intending to criticise. My question is: are the hours flexible enough to meet the needs of your target group? If not, could something be done to assist with the flexibility of your service to do that?

Ms OLIVE: Yes, to organise something outside you need to work in with other groups and other people. We have to cut one day off to do something on a night because there are penalty rates for working at night which is extra, and extra to find money to employ somebody else as well. You cannot run those bigger events without additional people.

Ms SMITH: We ran a homework centre for three years on two nights a week, for open slather. It was run voluntarily. It ran out of our building and we coughed up the money for the electricity and computer use and so on. We had, on average, 38 indigenous kids come to that program on two nights a week, week after week after week. We got to the stage where we actually had Uncle Buckie, who volunteered to come around in his bus at 8.30 p.m. to take kids home. That was run because there was a need, but there was absolutely no funding for it. There was absolutely no help from Education whatsoever. But we had 38 kids coming, or 40, who then improved at school. And then you have got the whole approach that Jeff was talking about.

Whatever you do with youth has to be holistic. It has to take in the family; it has to take in the community. When we start dealing with kids in isolation we start alienating families. The minute we alienate families we have lost the cause. It needs to be holistic. You need to have a youth centre that is open at weekends and on the nights for kids because, as Margaret said, it is just not safe to go home, it is safer to be on the street. We have to be serious and accept the fact, as Jeffrey said and other people here have said, we have a huge substance abuse problem in this area, we have a huge alcohol abuse problem in this area and we have a huge unemployment problem, not only in indigenous communities but across the board but the unemployment is even worse in indigenous communities. We have to take that holistic approach.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: We have talked about funding and all been in the situation that you are in. There are enormous gaps. Which bits are we doing now that we should not be doing? As we all know, there are probably things we are doing that we should not. Looking at what we are doing, is there something we are doing that we should not be doing because it does not work?

Ms YOUNG: I do not think there is very much collaboration between government departments. I think that there is a lack of communication between Health, Education, the Department of Community Services. When you are looking at holistic stuff around families, the Department of Housing should be talking to Police. There are a number of collaborative approaches that could work.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: I know of similar situations where you need health, education, housing, police but they will not talk to each other.

CHAIR: Is there a program that brings those agencies together regionally?

Ms YOUNG: Through Families New South Wales there is the RCMG. So there are some models that do work.

CHAIR: Does that still work reasonably well?

Ms YOUNG: Allegedly. I cannot comment. I am not involved at that level.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: The Premier's Department has trialled caseworking dysfunctional families through interagency support. It is at an early stage. I wish they would go ahead with it and break down this wall so that the Department of Health, the Department of Community Services, Police, Juvenile Justice, the Department of Housing, all those agencies, can sit down and put information about a family on the table rather than the scattergun approach that is happening now, which I am sure frustrates everyone in this room. I do not know why governments, Coalition or Labor, cannot see the problem and just work together to fix communities. In a lot of these small communities it is only, at most, half a dozen families that need to be supported and these kids could be lifted up and you have a result.

Ms SMITH: You often find that out of juvenile justice conferencing when it has got to that stage, the kid has committed a crime and there are several agencies involved and everyone is there, we have all started working together about that particular kid and what is good for the kid. You find constantly the same issues that caused that behaviour in the first place, which is lack of employment in the family, drug and alcohol abuse in the family. It goes on and on, yet we continue to deal in isolation.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: I heard what Gretchen said about lack of cooperation. Would anyone else like to add to that?

Ms RUTLEDGE: Along that same issue, it has been pointed out to me that having the Department of Community Services as the mandatory reporting organisation as the same organisation that is the service provider creates a lot of problems. Mandatory notification should probably be a police issue. It is illegal

behaviour. So much of the department's resources are taken up in following that up and they find it very difficult for the other part of their operations. They are compromised by a lack of resources.

Mr RICHARDSON: There was a system in which I was involved in Queensland before moving down here. I am not sure what the final outcome was. We had roundtables like we are having here today bringing together all the government departments in a town with the community. The amount of resources that we found people had a little bit of everywhere, once you put them together and start to work together you could make changes. The Main Roads, or the Roads and Traffic Authority, said, "What have we got to do with health or education?" "Don't you blokes have a bit to do with transport?" The Department of Primary Industries said, "What have we got?" "Haven't you blokes got agronomists and horticulturists?" So it is bringing together all those departments, all those little buckets of money, all trying to do good work. Everyone tries to do their very best but it is just taking away some of the bureaucracy that sits above them and will not let this department work with that department. Some of that you really need to kick in the head of the politicians.

I am afraid there are too many bureaucrats between you fellows, and I am a bureaucrat and I work with the State Government. There is too much watering down. As the manager of a hospital you could get called upon to do a ministerial because of something that has happened. You write the ministerial to the manager and sign it off. It goes off to the department and they ultimately give it to the Minister. You leave your name on it, and it ultimately goes to the Minister. The Minister gets given the story of what we think should be told. I am sure you have seen the Minister get hung out and dried on that sort of stuff. There is just too much between what we tell you fellows. That is what is so good about this roundtable because there are too many levels in between us. As a health provider I have to cut out some of the bureaucracy somewhere. I am getting on towards the end of my career, so if I get knocked off it does not really matter. We developed this policy that we put the client at the centre of all we do and to hell with just about everything else that gets in the road. I have to provide this service to that person.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Do you find privacy laws can be a hindrance to people working together?

Mr RICHARDSON: Absolutely. The client can go and stand in a queue at Woolworths and talk about what their health problem is, but if that dare comes out of the health service somewhere I am in all sorts of trouble. People can stand out in the street and talk about their operations.

CHAIR: Have there been improvements in recent times to make the sharing of information easier between agencies and overcome some of the privacy difficulties?

Ms YOUNG: I think between agencies it is less formal in adhering to our contractual obligations. It is actually dealing with government departments that is the issue.

CHAIR: Have you seen any changes in government departments in their flexibility in sharing information?

Ms YOUNG: No.

CHAIR: At one stage there was a move to try to introduce some new arrangements that would make the sharing of information for difficult clients easier. I do not know whether it has had any effect on the ground.

Ms YOUNG: No, it is individual. It depends on the personality of the worker.

Ms OLIVE: No, it has not. We have been running the Brighter Futures program, the early intervention program, and this is our second year. Jeff was saying about working with the whole family. Though we have been running only for this short period of time and it is in a new process, with Department of Community Services new funding, we can see some changes and positive things for some families. Jeff was saying about working with the whole family and that is.

CHAIR: You are seeing some changes?

Ms OLIVE: We are seeing some changes in relation to that. I am not sure what Gretchen has seen because hers has been running 12 months. There is going to be a review of the whole thing. It will be interesting what comes out of it. We can see changes working with those families. There are huge complex needs of those

families and simple things that should have been addressed. One family I will mention. The whole house was falling on top of them. Children were sleeping in cupboards and a whole range of things—not because the family had not done anything about it; they had applied. The housing situation has had a huge impact on people. People are moving away paying huge money. We have emergency relief. Some families are coming in who are paying more rent than they are actually getting in income because they have nowhere to live other than what is available. That has a huge impact on a family, how they function and survive. Jeff was talking about those things.

In relation to sharing information, some of these families come through the DOCS Helpline to the Brighter Futures. They are assessed by DOCS in meeting certain criteria. When the information comes, lots of times, and this is not just present, but in the past, you get only a little bit of information about that family. It might be one little thing and they have got 25 huge complex things. That sharing of information is important for us to know how to work with those families to build up a trust because all that information you need to gain to understand where that family is coming from, what is happening to them and the complex needs that they have. We get clients to sign consent forms and we talk about what we will do and what they agree they want us to do. Between services it is very good, but in some instances, not in all cases, the sharing between departments is very low on the important issues.

CHAIR: I am conscious that Peter wants to say something. After Peter has commented, we will ask you for just one thing you would like to see changed for children and young people in the age group of 9 to 14 years. If you could start to turn your attention to that: If you could have anything, what would you have?

Rev. BOUGHEY: We are talking about government departments not talking to one another. Probably we could set an example, the services here, by sharing our information. I am sure we could all help each other. It is not just governments; we should do it ourselves and then probably go with a stronger voice to a government agency. The other thing is that especially with boys, talking about violent behaviour on the increase, we need to address the disconnectedness of boys and girls to the community and to their families. This disconnectedness has made Australia one of the highest youth suicide rates in the world. We live in the best country in the world, so why do boys, especially rural kids, commit suicide? There is a deep, deep problem we need to address. It goes back to broken families, broken relationships. I think there should be some kind of definitive action we could take where we can help especially boys. They seem to have lost their way and they do not know who they really are. It is no reflection on any females here but a lot of studies have indicated that up until recently education was feminised. In other words, there were areas where boys were being suppressed, their natural instincts of being rebellious. The testosterone in their bodies is a movement chemical and boys cannot sit still. If that can be addressed in some way in the way boys are taught, then they can realise and grow into a proper man rather than not knowing exactly where they fit.

CHAIR: Thank you, Peter. Before we move on to the one thing you could change what would it be, is there anyone who has not had an opportunity but would like to say something? Auntie Nora, do you want to add anything to the discussion?

Ms CALDWELL: We need more for our kids, things they can use like cinemas. They have got nothing here for the kids. When they want to go to an indoor game they have to go to Lismore. Indoor bowls, a stadium, they go over there. There is nothing in Casino for our kids. If they are bored they are on the street. They will tell you themselves, "There is nothing here for us". I sit down and talk with the kids. They just sit and play cards. We have had meetings with police about it. The police say, "If they are sitting there and playing cards we can't do nothing about it if they are sitting quiet and not bothering anybody else." That was our main thing, us elders, about the kids playing cards on the street. When we grew up we weren't allowed to do that, the elders would not let us play cards. But this generation, to me they are bored. They have got nothing around them here that can occupy their minds, like cinemas or indoor games, to get them off the street. I sit with the kids during the day in the street and of a weekend I come down and they are just bored. They say, "That's all we can do is sit and play cards. There is nothing else for us to do."

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Are sporting fees a problem for families for those kids to get involved.

Ms CALDWELL: We have a got a bus that we used to take the kids over to Lismore and we have to maintain that sometimes but we have not got the money to do that, you know. It comes back to the funding. We have been taking the kids over in our cars. Some voluntary things have been done with the community. Parents take them across just to get them motivated in doing something. So it comes back to funding again.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: You really do live an hour away from the best beaches in the world. How would a kid in that age group be able to get to the beach?

Ms SHELLEY: They used to have the train.

Ms CALDWELL: They used to go down by train or we would try to organise a bus to take get them down. But then we would all put together and throw in, but you know, it comes back to that funding again. A lot of kids love to go to the beach. When kids say they are going to the beach they all want to go, you know.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: But they cannot get there. Is it right to say that they just cannot get there?

Ms CALDWELL: That is right and some of the parents that have not got cars, you know, other parents will take them. This is a big thing in Casino we have not got a vehicle or a bus to do that, even to get our kids over there to Lismore to go indoor sports, bowls or whatever.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: We have talked a lot about Casino but even for kids in Coraki.

Ms CALDWELL: Yes, we have got communities coming in here now from outreach communities that are living now in Casino because there is nothing out there for them and now there is nothing in here for them. This is why us elders we are trying to work with kids from out of the town, who is coming in with our kids and causing a big problem, you know. But that is what I would like to see, more activities there for our kids, Casino to have something indoor bowls or whatever.

Ms SHELLEY: Something that perhaps gets a bit forgotten about is specifically that nine to 14 years age there are two things that impact on them. I think really a huge gap is there. One of course is puberty—there are all these changes that happen. If you look at one of those sheets that has the life stressors or big changes that happen to you in your life, puberty is one of them. The other one is changing from primary school to high school. I remember that myself as a child when you are in this space where you are really comfortable, you are the top dog, you are the biggest kid and you suddenly move into a totally different environment and it is really a huge change.

There is nothing there that is actually: this is how we help kids get through this, this is how we help them get through puberty, this is how we help them get through the transition from primary to high school. I see in my service, because I am open during the day, I do get to see the ones that are not attending school, the 13 and 14 years olds who have missed out. As someone else said, a lot of the time there are literacy problems, they are not coping at school because they just cannot keep up. They are sitting in class feeling like they are really stupid because everyone else is following and you are not, and that sort of thing. Basically there is just a big gap there that are major stresses.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Just very quickly, just to highlight the regional nature of this visit. There are some very small communities with very small primary schools, are there not? So the kids who are leaving in year 6 might even be in a school of maybe 20 kids in the whole school?

Ms SHELLEY: Yes, that is right.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: So it is big transition, is it not?

Ms SHELLEY: It is huge. And also I have noticed myself that is also when a lot of bullying can impact. Especially if you have got to go to a new school where you do not know anyone and you get picked on, you are not going to want to face it, it is just too frightening.

Rev. BOUGHEY: That is where this rock and water program is going to teach them how to cope with bullying. That is why we started in years 5 and 6 so the transition to high school is not so great because they know how to handle themselves in high school.

Ms PETROVIC: I was a member of Coraki crime prevention committee that was looking at issues for Coraki young people. There are a number of people in the primary schools there who moved to different high schools. Now Coraki is one of those small primary schools that you were talking about that is an example. It has three high schools that are feeder schools. So some kids from Coraki come to Casino, so that is what, 30 minutes

this direction. Some kids go to Lismore, so 30 minutes north, and then some kids go to Evans Head which is 30 minutes east. And literally within, I think, two weeks in one of the particular high schools every single child that had gone from that primary school had been suspended. That was when they said "This is crazy. We have got to do something to fix it". But by the time they had all come back, the ones that did come back, to the school, and everyone assumed that they had just gone to one of the other two schools.

So there is this whole bunch of kids that noone even knows has not just been suspended. They do not know whether they have been suspended or they have transferred to another school. And it was not until those three high schools came and sat at the same table at the primary school that they started to actually being quite successful. They had a good transition last year because it had to have kids from all three of those high schools take care of the kids from the primary schools. Otherwise, it was just a matter of "What do you like? What do you not like? It is too far to go anywhere."

I mean its like, I mean, I am saying half an hour but that is if you jump in the car. Once you are on a school bus and you have the whole route stopping, and everything, it is a good hour. So you have got year 6 and you just walk down the road to year 6 with a nice little friendly school environment, and then you have got year 7—and you might have challenging behaviour already in year 6 because of the social demographics that you are in—and then all of a sudden you move to year 7. You have to travel an hour on a bus. You have been split from your own classmates three ways. You arrive in a completely different town, probably one that you have not even been to at any other time, and you have a completely new set of rules. If you muck up you get to go home and hang out at the beach at the river beach. Back with the year 5s. The temptation is just to get out. It is so hard.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: How was that picked up?

Ms PETROVIC: Because there were people in the primary school there who were keeping track of what was happening for those kids.

Ms YOUNG: There was a youth program based at the neighbourhood centre that covers that area and it was adhering to its mandatory reporting and also doing liaison with home school liaison officers. Truancy is a huge issue in that community.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Is it okay in the primary school?

Ms OLIVE: There is a truancy issue in primary school too.

Ms YOUNG: That may be the case in Casino but I am specifically talking about Coraki not so much with the K-6 area because the school has developed a really very good working relationship and holistic relationship with the Box Ridge Coraki community. Because there are those three feeder schools, there is a further difficulty around that. Some programs have been put in place that are attempting to address that. One of the main issues for those students is actually public transport, or what we refer to as public transport, private bus companies and a lot of the bus operators actually not having any cultural awareness or appropriateness in the way that they operate those bus timetables.

If a child at Coraki Box Ridge is thrown off the bus for inappropriate behaviour they are not able to get to school. It is an impediment to education and if those bus drivers do not have any education about what is culturally appropriate it is a circular thing. For me it is actually an equity issue about children getting to school.

CHAIR: I thank everyone. This has been a great insight for the committee about some of the issues confronting young people in regional rural New South Wales. I want to know from each of you what is the one thing you would change.

Ms RUTLEDGE: I think separating, for a holistic type of thing, this age group from family is difficult. I think even the Kyogle people would know that there is a lot of homelessness. There are a lot of people living in sheds. There are a lot of people living in really substandard conditions which makes all sorts of things difficult. So support for family, getting back to what Jeff was talking about, so that it can have a decent standard of living is, in the first instance, fundamental for all sorts of other things.

Ms SHELLEY: I guess I think it would be great to have some services that were focused on this particular age group and their emotional and mental health around those issues that I was talking about before.

CHAIR: Do you think we have the nine to 14 age group right or should it be 10 to 13 or 10 to 15?

Ms SHELLEY: Yes, I guess it is the age group that are dealing with those issues of changing school and puberty, and nine to 14 is pretty much it. I suppose even six to 14 because even that group there is nothing much there for, once you get into primary school.

Ms OLIVE: One thing, if a fairy came along and waved her wand—

CHAIR: We are not the fairies by the way.

Ms OLIVE: I think there needs to be a really flexible program where there is some area where those children can come, those that might be having difficulty at school, home or whatever it is where there are specialised people to develop programs around what their needs are in different way. And then working in with the whole system so there is a core mode of approach to something.

CHAIR: Do you mean like an after school program, vacation care program or more like a case management type of service?

Ms OLIVE: I think it needs to be more case management and involve the whole family and engage the whole family.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: If I said a one-stop shop would that be the answer? A child with a difficulty needs a one-stop shop?

Ms OLIVE: Yes, and I think it is that nine to 12 age group. Last year the Juvenile Justice Centre came to Casino and we had a big community meeting and they said that there is over-represented children in Casino, 10 years they were saying, what was happening with youth. They were actually dealing with 10-year-old children displaying that behaviour where youth were coming into the youth detention centre. They wanted to put a whole submission together and there was nobody in the community who could take it on. They approached us. We were actually just setting up our Brighter Futures program so we did not have the capacity. So there are people who want to work together. I see that Casino, from my point of view - when I first started 20 years ago it was Casino Neighbourhood Centre and St Vincent's de Paul were the only two organisations in Casino - we have developed a long way since then and I feel that we work together quite well in Casino. We share our resources and try to do what we can do together but I think there is a long way to go. A one-stop place where those children with difficulties can come with their families would be good. Families need that support.

Ms SMITH: One thing, a youth refuge.

Mr BUTCHER: I have concerns about young children between 11 and 14 with drug and alcohol issues and rehab money provides over 18. I think we need to assist with that dynamic that is occurring somehow.

CHAIR: So you are saying there is a service for over 18s?

Mr BUTCHER: Yes.

CHAIR: Is there any youth service at all?

Mr BUTCHER: No.

CHAIR: So there is no youth drug and alcohol service?

Mr BUTCHER: No, and I am getting 11 and 12 year olds binge drinking, and pot, heroin.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: For anybody less than 18 there is no drug and alcohol service?

Mr BUTCHER: No, because you have to be 18 to drink.

Ms YOUNG: I think Tony is specifically talking about over 18 there are drug and alcohol services. The North Coast Area Health Service program does take kids under 18.

Ms SMITH: But they are very difficult to get them into.

The Hon. CATHERINE CUSACK: Will the Richmond Clinic help with that at all?

Ms SMITH: There was a kid three weeks ago who was in accident and emergency for five days because they did not have a bed. He was suicidal et cetera. He was in accident and emergency for five days. He then went into Richmond Clinic for one day and was then sent home with medication. Where is the counselling? This is an ongoing problem. We will commit this child again and again because nothing happens.

CHAIR: You said youth refuge and you said drug and alcohol services but we probably need to add mental health services?

Ms SMITH: Absolutely high on the list.

Ms YOUNG: I would say in terms of target group it would be 8 to 12. I think there would be some duplication if you are looking at 13, with funding specifically that is already set up around that. I can see, even though the evidence base and the evidence research is not out yet around Brighter Futures, a program that is Brighter Futures for 8 to 12 year olds specifically that is co-ordinated.

CHAIR: Where does that cut out?

Ms YOUNG: Eight. That is coordinated, intense case management that is holistic and family centred.

CHAIR: So you said Brighter Futures is to the age of 13?

Ms YOUNG: Yes.

CHAIR: Peter, would you like to comment?

Rev. BOUGHEY: One thing I would like to come out of today is greater cooperation between the people who are here this morning, rather than everyone working in isolation and then picked off by government agencies. I would rather we got together and worked as one, surely we would get more funding with a stronger voice.

CHAIR: Thank you. Jeff, would you like to say something?

Mr RICHARDSON: The fairy that my friend mentioned could come along, I would like funding to put parents and children together, for the nine to 14-year-olds. I like that age group, that is where I see a lot of problems. I want to bring the parents into their care. Ideally I would love to get them back out of their bush and doing some activities with some of our nature stuff rather than just different things. I am not talking about just Aboriginal kids. It is essential for all people to get back to learn. There are things they can do, they do not have to have someone do something for them. They can learn to go fishing. I would like an uncles and aunties program where some of the parents—and there must be some parents out there who want to work. Perhaps they could take three or four of the kids up to the bush somewhere.

Like Auntie Nora said, we do not have the money to put petrol in cars. Once again, this is not just for Aboriginal kids. That whole lower socioeconomic group approached me and say they have economic problems where it is just very difficult to whip over to Ballina with the kids for the weekend.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: You are referring to family values?

Mr RICHARDSON: Yes. We cannot go past family values. That is what set me up on the right path in life and got me to work with my family. Go work with old bill, he is a good bloke. We are just not doing that any more where we learn respect for our country. Family values, yes, but it needs funding so that families can work with them.

CHAIR: Thank you. Joanne, would you like to comment?

Ms PETROVIC: If I could change one thing I would put sport and recreation together. I would make sport and recreation opportunities much easier to get into. It is quite an expensive process nowadays and also quite challenging for the people that run these sport and recreation programs. Sport and recreation involvement has been shown to make a difference across a mass scale in developing resilience. It is very hard to get to sport and recreation in this area. The Casino football team has always won home games; they never win away games. Everyone thinks it is because they are away games, but the reality is that a number of Aboriginal kids cannot get to the away games and they lose half their team.

Simple things like transporting kids to recreation facilities would help. The youth dance cooperative exists for young people. I went along to one. Most of those kids were homeless and a whole lot of other kids and they keep going to dancing and sport and recreation activities, and I can see the difference. If anything, I would make sport and recreation activities available for young people at very minimal or no charge, with transport to and from on weekends. That would make a lot of difference.

CHAIR: Thank you. Aunty Nora, do you want to add anything?

Ms CALDWELL: I go with what Jeff and Jo said and leave it there.

CHAIR: Does anyone else want to add something? I know some of you have travelled long distances. The Committee appreciates that, because this inquiry and the report we will write covers an area in which some research has been done. However, it is an area in which there has been some research, but it has not been as well researched as other areas. We are really relying on the information and the advice that we get from our public hearings. These processes are very important to us. We expect that the report will be finalised by the end of the year and it will be tabled in Parliament. A copy will be available to everyone.

Do you all give the Committee permission to make public what you have said at the hearing today? A copy of your transcript will be made available to you and you can check it to make sure it is accurate. If you do not agree to make it public the Committee cannot put it on the website and we cannot use it in our public report. So, do you all give the Committee permission to make public what you have said today? Or, does anyone have a problem with that? You have all agreed to that.

On the motion of the Hon. Catherine Cusack, seconded by the member for Clarence, that will be done.

When a copy of that transcript is made available you can make corrections to it. It will then go on the Committee website and be used as part of the Committee report. The report goes to the Government. I thank you all for giving evidence.

(The Committee adjourned at 11.45 a.m.)