

REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

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

At Fairfield on Friday 8 August 2008

The Committee met at 10.30 a.m.

PRESENT

The Hon C. M. Tebbutt (Chair)

Legislative Council

Reverend the Hon. F. J. Nile

Legislative Assembly

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

CHAIR: I declare the hearing open. I am the Chair of the Committee for Children and Young People, and we are doing an inquiry into children between the ages of nine and 14 years of age. I acknowledge the Daruk people, who are the traditional custodians of the land that we are on today, and pay my respects to elders past and present of the Daruk nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal people present. Before we start the formal part of the hearing I ask people to turn off their mobile phones.

WENDY JUNE PROTHEROE, General Manager, Counselling Services, BoysTown, Suite 9, Black Street, Milton, Queensland, sworn and examined:

CHAIR: I understand that the proceedings for today's hearing have been explained to you. Is that correct?

Ms PROTHEROE: Yes, that is correct.

CHAIR: We have received a submission from BoysTown. Do you wish that submission to be part of your evidence and to be made public?

Ms PROTHEROE: Yes, that is fine.

CHAIR: Do you want to make an opening statement?

Ms PROTHEROE: I would like everyone here to know that BoysTown operates in New South Wales with a family refuge at North Richmond, where we have accommodation for 12 families, at Blacktown and Campbelltown with employment-based programs, and Kids Helpline. I have bought some data in relation to Kids Helpline calls received in New South Wales last year.

CHAIR: Do you want to say anything more about the services that BoysTown provides or about Kids Helpline? We have your submission but maybe you could talk a little about some of the strategies particularly that are being used to promote Kids Helpline because it is very well-known from what I have seen among young people.

Ms PROTHEROE: Kids Helpline is a national counselling service, so it is a telephone and online, email and web service for young people between the ages of five and 25. Last year down here we had 233,000 young people in New South Wales alone who tried to make contact with us, which is a significant number. We employ only permanent staff who are fully qualified. They are either psychologists, teachers or nurses, and we then put them through a training program so that they are able to provide their counselling, be it support, advice, significant online counselling and telephone counselling. They have to go through further training with us before they can go on the lines. We offer this service 24 hours a day, seven days a week, every day of the year. That includes Christmas. We actually get a lot of kids calling in on Christmas Day.

At the same time we also, not in New South Wales but we also offer the same service as Parentline in Queensland and the Northern Territory so that we can try to reach some of those parents who sometimes the kids are telling us about. Kids have been telling us for 17 years that they wish someone would listen. So before we go into all the details of the sorts of issues we can identify, young kids call us and say, "Would someone please listen to what we are trying to say?" We get a lot of testing calls but we have a rule in Kids Helpline that every call be treated with dignity and that even for those kids who are making a telephone call to try us out they will be treated seriously because they are often the ones who will come back later and, if they know that you do not just pay lip service to what they are saying to you, they are more likely to seek out some supported help.

So our services, in some instances, are one-offs but in many instances—and again I have some figures for you—are ongoing counselling. We actually have some young kids who have been with us for years. We live for the nice emails and letters that come in that say, "Hey, you made a difference". Those counsellors will sometimes pick up a phone on their eight-hour shift—it will be five hours on the line at any one stage—and they might pick up the phone and have somebody saying to them, "I'm having a big fight with my brother and I don't know what to do." They will hang up and then pick up the phone and the next kid will say, "I'm on the train line and I have taken the tablets." And that is it. They need to be able to jump from suicide cases to the lighter ones as you go through.

CHAIR: With the children you said have sometimes been with you over a long period of time, does it work that they just keep ringing you or do they actually establish a relationship with one counsellor, they make phone appointments. How does that ongoing relationship work? I must admit I have always imagined the service to be much more of a kind of immediate response, not necessarily something over a number of years.

Ms PROTHEROE: Last year, of those calls that came in, we were able to respond to 117,500 from New South Wales. Of those, we have 16,359 that are ongoing counselling sessions. So those are young kids in

New South Wales who come back again and again. If it is a counselling session we make sure they have their own counsellor. We will say to them—everybody works with a pseudonym; they do not use their own names—that John will be on counselling support on such and such a time so they can come back. We also have extensive case notes and case management systems so that if it is a crisis and they call and their own counsellor is not available we can automatically pull up the notes on that young child and work on those notes with somebody else.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: I noted in the annual report that you get a lot of calls from indigenous young people. What access do they have to a telephone or mobile phone? How do they get in touch with you?

Ms PROTHEROE: Mainly they come in through the mobile phones. We are having a problem in that lot of public telephones in remote areas are now being taken away. That has caused some of our young people difficulties. So it is mainly through mobile phones that they are coming to us. Indigenous kids like to talk so we actually have a yarning program as well. So besides the capacity to phone in, we have a project officer who we send out to communities and they usually get to—I think last year Dubbo and they are about to go to Mildura—but we usually try to get to one to two communities each year in each State where we do yarning with kids face to face. We actually talk to them about what it is like to see it because the hard part for them is to seek help, making that initial contact. We train our counsellors in yarning. We do a lot of cultural work in that area so that they can find and they can hear the way in which the kids are talking to us. So, yes, through mobile phones and if mobile phones are called from Optus then it is no charge.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: When they call do some of them want to talk to an indigenous person?

Ms PROTHEROE: We have some indigenous counsellors but we cannot provide that all the time. So, no. I think lots of the breakdown happens when we go out and do the yarning face to face. If the counsellors are trained in knowing what sort of language we will get and how the kids react, we can usually put them at ease fairly well.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: The regular callers, the ones who need help and counsel regularly on the phone, is there any referral for them for further face to face, and what follow through percentage do you get for that?

Ms PROTHEROE: Last year we had 69 per cent of all the calls that came in for New South Wales—these are the counselling calls now—were managed totally by Kids Helpline; 11 per cent of the calls were referred immediately as a crisis or a three-way call so we would have some very good links. For example, we link with DOCS, so if we have somebody in a region where a young person rings in and it is a crisis we can do a three-way call with somebody else to make sure we have contact. A lot of the kids are quite concerned about going to somebody face to face and it often needs a few sessions with a counsellor to say, "Why don't we stay on the phone with you and get somebody that we can get you to talk to" and we will pass them over in that way. Twenty-three per cent of those callers were also referred on later to guidance officers or to doctors, et cetera, depending on the calls.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: And they followed through with that?

Ms PROTHEROE: I can tell you that 70 per cent kept getting followed through. I can tell you the 11 per cent where we were in a three-way call, we keep contact with them. We have close relationships with police, who get back to us very regularly about what happens in relation to the kids. In terms of the referrals to guidance officers, et cetera, I will not say that I know everybody was followed up.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: How long does your average child have to wait before the call is picked up?

Ms PROTHEROE: I cannot give you an average time. It depends on the time of the day and the session that they come in. I can tell you that 5,500 kids were younger than 15 years of age who came through from New South Wales last year. Some of them get through very quickly; some of them will have to wait about 20 minutes to get through. It depends. We do not have enough resources to have all the shifts manned all the time. There is somebody there all the time but not necessarily the right numbers.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: You keep a percentage of calls not followed through with where they ring and they do not get answered. About what is your percentage for that?

Ms PROTHEROE: In 2006—I know that one off pat—we had 47 per cent of our calls we could not answer in time. Even though across Australia we responded to nearly 400,000, so when you are working with the staff you have to say: you have to focus on the fact that you got to 400,000 kids because the service itself is funded. It costs just over \$8 million a year to run, and we get support from the Federal Government out of its mental health branch to about \$1.5 million a year. Outside of that BoysTown—please buy tickets in the lotteries, as often as you can—either through donors or BoysTown actually funds it themselves in terms of what we do. So obviously we reach a stage where we go to provide all the services we provide, this is the amount we can ever provide to Kids Helpline and outside of that we have to watch telephone calls not get answered.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: The reason I ask is so the real demand is considerably greater than the calls you have answered.

Ms PROTHEROE: By far.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: DOCS mandatory notification—as you know, sometimes children disclose stuff that they do not want disclosed but you are mandatory notifiers?

Ms PROTHEROE: Yes we are, under 18 years of age. Last year, for example, 144 cases were reported for protective actions from New South Wales. They were either child abuse cases—we had 790 child abuse cases. Some of those we deal with by doing a three-way referral. These ones are crisis that I am talking about and some of them were suicide cases. Yes, we refer on. Even though we tell kids that it is confidential and anonymous, we tell them, "If you are going to talk to us about this, then we are going to make a judgement. We have to get you help", and we report.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: When they ring, they have to identify who they are and where they are from?

Ms PROTHEROE: No. Our telephone system is such that we can identify regionally where people are from in Australia. We have very close relationships with Optus and Telstra, so that if we have a call that we think is a significant problem and we need to refer straightaway, we can do a trace on that call regardless of where it is. We are not going to be there to hear kids attempting to suicide and not do anything, so we have that system. It is quite a sophisticated system that we run.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: The child does not need to give their name and address as part of the initial part of the call?

Ms PROTHEROE: No; we can track it. Sometimes, particularly in the regional areas, by the time we get to the police they will usually know. If we are talking to them about a kid and saying, "Listen, we are really concerned about what is happening", the police are fairly good.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: How is the Kids Helpline publicised to your average year 5 child?

Ms PROTHEROE: It is quite a conundrum, isn't it? We cannot pick up all the calls, but the kids are yelling out and wanting us to get closer to them. On the business plan to the Kids Helpline this year, we are doing a significant marketing campaign to the under 12s in primary schools. On Monday I was in Canberra talking to a child support agency to ask if they can help us in any way get through the school systems. We want to make contact with the education systems in each State to ask if we can get access through their schools to get some marketing material out.

If I can talk about a young five year old who called us last year. Probably one of the ones that stuck with me most from last year was from a fairly large city in New South Wales. I will call the little girl Sally. She went to school fairly early in the year. At lunchtime she was crying, and an eight-year-old boy went to her and said, "What's wrong?" She started to tell him, and he gave her a mobile phone. She rang the Kids Helpline and got through straightaway.

She was in a situation where her parents were separated and she lived one week with mum and one week with dad. Mum had a new boyfriend. The boyfriend was quite abusive towards Sally, and mum decided

she could solve the problem because she wanted to keep Sally at home on those weeks. So she used to take her downstairs to the laundry and lock her in the cupboard under the sink. That was last year, in New South Wales. We had that child removed by working with them.

I think we need to understand what some of our young kids in Australia are going through. Also, for us it was a real wake-up call, in saying we really have to get out there and market to those young kids again. We watched our age cohort getting large and larger towards the 14-to-18 age group, as we dropped off our marketing to the younger ones. So we now need to make sure those young kids know where to go.

CHAIR: Thank you for the information provided in the submission; it breaks down quite extensively the various issues that children and young people, in the age group we are looking at, raise. I do not know whether you can answer this, but do you know if there is any significant difference between the issues that have been raised by this group compared with, say, children in the older age group? I can see here that the big issues are relationships with family, relationships with peers and friends, and bullying or emotional behaviour management. Would that be similar for the older age group, do you think?

Ms PROTHEROE: I would be able to give you those figures; I do not have them with me now. We have put out a report early in this half of the year that reflects the information for the year before, which will show you the top 10 concerns for each age group. It also breaks it down into male and female. Until about 16, I think it is, family relationships are the strongest. I think emotional relationships was the next one to come up in New South Wales. But I can certainly have a look at that for you, and I can send you further information.

CHAIR: In terms of your understanding of the issues that children and young people in this age group are raising, do you have any advice to give us about the sorts of services you think might be lacking that might help address some of the needs of this age group? Obviously, your service is there for when they get to a point when they really feel as though they have no-one else to turn to, and you can put a range of supports in place. Are there things we could be doing earlier, do you think, that would help this age group?

Ms PROTHEROE: I am quite supportive of the parent line, and I watch how that is having an effect on some of our young children.

CHAIR: That is the DOCS service?

Ms PROTHEROE: No, Parentline as we run it. We have run the parent line, but not down here.

CHAIR: I do not know that ours is called parent line, but we have a parenting information service that is relatively new. Please tell us about the parent line.

Ms PROTHEROE: We have a telephone and online counselling service for parents to ring in to talk to us about issues with their children. More and more often now we are getting very frustrated parents of young kids who are saying to us, "What will I do? How will I stop this feeling that I want to hit them?" For me, that is really powerful. If we save two kids a year by providing that sort of support and back-up, it is worthwhile. We use some counselling skills that we have developed over the years that we have run the program. We also use PPP parenting, which is a fairly well-known, structured program that we put people through. It is a similar model, in that parents can come back.

Do I think that is important? I think it is absolutely essential for the younger children, because some of the parents are very young kids themselves, particularly from remote communities. Some of the remote communities we are in, we are working with 15 to 18-year-olds who are already parents, and they are trying to cope with their own lives and they are not able to look after children at the same time. So I think that is really important.

In our refuge at San Miguel, we welcome single dads with their families. Not many places in Australia will do that; most refuges will say they will take mums and their families. In fact, we have a domestic violence refuge in southeast Queensland where we welcome adolescent boys. We are the only one in a domestic violence refuge that says, "You can bring an adolescent boy." When they come to our refuges, we make sure that there is a program that is put around the parents and the kids straightaway.

I think you need to look at what is available for dads. We have a couple of families at the moment. One dad has either eight or nine children under the age of 12 that he is trying to raise by himself. He has, I think, four

of his own children, and the others are from a relationship where the partner has gone to jail. He is fighting a really strong fight to say, "These children deserve a parent, and I want to be with them." If I were to say to you what we should do, I think it is to recognise that this age group you are talking about need really strong parents or carers to give them some structure around their lives and some support. I think those things need to be looked at quite strongly.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: You mentioned earlier that you had a three-way call with a DOCS person. We know there are a lot of delays in the DOCS system. How quickly can you get that DOCS person involved with that crisis call?

Ms PROTHEROE: The majority of our calls are very quickly responded to. I am not going to say that we have not had some issues, because we have. But I would also say that where we did have an issue this year and we have made contact with the director, that was sorted out quite quickly. That was to do with the caseload of the DOCS workers. Are we always able to make contact as quickly as we should? The answer is no. But it is in the minority of cases, not always the majority.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Do you have a priority system?

Ms PROTHEROE: We have a referral database in the Kids Helpline that allows us to get to special numbers in lots of cases.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: With regard to referrals, do you have a way of monitoring how many children take up the offer, to ensure that they do contact the person?

Ms PROTHEROE: In most of our cases, we refer with the child being involved and knowing they are being referred on, and then we do get follow-ups in terms of that, yes. I cannot give you the statistics; I have not brought them with me. We have a referral database and we have staff who are involved in doing an ongoing audit of that database, and we have feedback, so we keep in touch with the services that we refer to. Once we ask for the data, we say, "How many clients have you got?", so we know what we are working with. A lot of those kids stay with us, while we are doing this face to face. They still come, because they feel quite safe. I cannot give you the statistics, I am sorry.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Do you feel the great majority do take your advice on referral? Would it be 80 or 90 per cent?

Ms PROTHEROE: I will not give you a percentage, but I know that we have a very good relationship in getting our kids out to face-to-face counselling when we need to have them there. But I could not tell you the percentage on that.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: Optus gives the kids free calls. What about from Telstra phones?

Ms PROTHEROE: No.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: I am sure you have had negotiations on that?

Ms PROTHEROE: Yes.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: With regard to professionals, you say 23 per cent of your calls are referred to guidance officers. Is there a facility for those guidance officers or doctors to obtain information from the Kids Helpline?

Ms PROTHEROE: We send our marketing material out to each of them.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: If a client turns up having been referred by the helpline, is there any facility for that person to say, "Why is this person here?"

Ms PROTHEROE: There would be two ways in which that might happen. If it was a crisis situation, and there was a duty of care responsibility, quite obviously we would share that information and we would tell the client. If we are doing a three-way referral and moving through, we ask the permission of the client and we share that information. We also have to work within the privacy legislation.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: With regard to indigenous and non-indigenous children, have you identified any particular problems that are more related to indigenous children, or are they similar problems, regardless of whether they are indigenous or non-indigenous?

Ms PROTHEROE: My personal view is that kids are kids, no matter where they are. Kids in regional and remote areas often reflect similar situations to kids in remote indigenous communities. They have a lot of stress around family relationships because a lot of their life is built around their family and their extended family, so they probably reflect that more to us.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: With regard to sexual abuse, is that shown up more in indigenous children?

Ms PROTHEROE: I do not have a breakdown of whether it is more with indigenous children or not. In terms of child abuse cases, we had 789 child abuse cases that were significant child abuse cases, which we talked about last year. Of those, 47 per cent were physical abuse, 38 per cent sexual abuse, 11 per cent emotional abuse, and 4 per cent neglect.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Your records would have the information as to whether they were indigenous or non-indigenous?

Ms PROTHEROE: I cannot see why we cannot break it down. I have never asked for it to be broken down, but I probably could.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: That is where we need to focus more support.

Ms PROTHEROE: We have a new project that we are just starting this year with remote indigenous communities, a test project. We are not actually coming to a community in New South Wales, I must admit, but we are going out to a community and putting in three computers that will be logged straight to the Kids Helpline. We will be working with a family nurse or an elder out there who helps in the protection of that, and providing a couple of mobile phones, and then doing a session with the kids out there talking about how they can seek help.

We are going out to four communities and saying, "If we physically put it there and then we come and visit you, are you more likely to come back and seek help?" Part of the issue in a remote indigenous community is that they have to feel very safe in making the contact because they are still going to be left there. BoysTown works at Balgo, in the Kimberleys. We have staff in the Kimberleys, and we are using some of the information we are learning from that remote community. We have four sites that we are going to go to and put in a hub, and see if we can, over the next couple of years, improve the capacity of those kids to reach out for help.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: With regard to the mobile phones you are providing, that is where you really need to get a payment system in place. It would be quite expensive if they are on the phone for a while talking. Perhaps we could recommend that?

Ms PROTHEROE: Yes.

CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming along and giving evidence today; we really appreciate it. Are you happy for the Committee to make public what you have said at the hearing today?

Ms PROTHEROE: Yes, I am.

(The witness withdrew)

AMANDA BRAY, Manager, Community Life, Fairfield City Council, 86 Avoca Road, Wakeley,

CAROL RICHARDSON, Manager, Fairfield Business Education Partnership Inc., Bossley Park Community Centre, Belfield Road, Bossley Park,

CAROLYN BOURKE, Outreach and Marketing Coordinator, Fairfield City Library Service, Fairfield City Council, 86 Avoca Road, Wakeley,

DALE DONADEL, Manager, Chester Hill Neighbourhood Centre, PO Box 446, Chester Hill,

ASHUR ISAAC, Community Youth Worker, Assyrian Resource Centre, PO Box 101, Fairfield, and

PETER PHAM, Links to Learning Coordinator, 84C John Street, Cabramatta, sworn and examined:

TAIRYN VERGARA, Manager, Parks Community Network, PO Box 3147 Wetherill Park,

RICCI BARTEL, Coordinator, Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre, corner of Railway Parade and McBurney Road, Cabramatta,

ELAINE HIRST, General Manager, Community First Step, Level 1, 25 Barbara Street, Fairfield, and

JORGE AROCHE, Executive Director, STARTTS, 152–168 The Horsley Drive, Carramar, affirmed and examined:

CHAIR: Thank you all for coming. In order to hear from a number of service providers we thought this was the best way: rather than have people appearing and giving individual submissions will try and get a discussion or a conversation going. Hansard will be recording what you are saying and we will give you an opportunity at the end to say whether you want your evidence to be made public or not. I am happy to go around the room and people can contribute what they want to say, and if there are other issues that come up please feel free to talk about those as well. This area, looking at children between the ages of nine and 14 years, is an area where there has been some research but it is nowhere near as well researched as either children in the younger years or teenagers of the older age group.

The evidence that we hear from our witnesses, the evidence that you are providing, is critical to the report that we put together. Feel free to tell us anything you think we should know that will help us make a satisfactory report into the needs of children between the ages of nine and 14 years. The first thing I want to ask is a simple question: what do you think are the main issues for children in this age group?

Ms BRAY: There are so many issues, and we will probably go into a bit of a debate on each one. I think you need to have an understanding of the Fairfield City residents, so I might give you a little bit of an overview of the demographic population in Fairfield. Fairfield LGA is the third most populated LGA in the Sydney statistical division. Fairfield has 16,622 young people and children aged between the ages of 9 and 14, which represents about 9.24 per cent of our population. It is a very large proportion and we have an overrepresentation of that cohort in Fairfield City.

Fairfield City is the most multicultural city in Australia with 72.5 percent of our residents speaking a language other than English, and we have a range of languages and cultural groups within the city as well. The city also accepts more migrants than any other city, so we have a large number of migrants and refugees and a lot of these are families with children within this age group. Fairfield is also a relatively disadvantaged community. The results of the SEIFA, the social economic index for area, measures Fairfield in the bottom 10 per cent of the State in SEIFA indices. We are the fourth worst, if that is the word, in the State, and most of those other areas are rural indigenous areas within the lower SEIFA areas.

We also have a whole range of issues such as health: we have the highest rates of diabetes, the highest rates of smoking, so there is a whole range of challenges that our community faces and I want to present some of that information so you can get a picture of where some of the comments that may come later stem from. The issues that we are going to present here today are also probably common in a lot of relative disadvantaged areas,

so they are not just isolated to Fairfield LGA. However, we do have that uniqueness of the disadvantage and the multicultural diversity within the one area.

I will not go through the submission because you have got a copy of it but if I look at children nine to 14 years of age I think one of the biggest challenges for children is the transition phase. It is a period where they are going from being children to young people; it is a period where they are going from primary school to high school; it is a period where they are, I guess, being very much cared for by their parents very closely to having some independence and being able to make some decisions on their own. I think it is a period of high risk where young people could either take a path which most of us would not like them to see or a path where it is more accepted in society. I would also like to make some comments on parents, although I do not know if there is a question on parents. Should I just look at the children now or talk about parents as well?

CHAIR: We want to hear about parents as well.

Ms BRAY: First of all I would like to say that the State Government policies very much support the 0 to eight year cohort, particularly for the Families NSW process, and I think they should be congratulated. I think there are some amazing projects happening within that group, and the resourcing that is going into that group is amazing. The reduction of class sizes, for instance, in having one to 20 children, does not happen with the nine to 14 age group; it has not come through. But there are some very good initiatives in the early years between that 0 to eight age group. There are also a number of funded applications or funding programs for the CSGP Program, which support young people from 12 to 25. Within this area we have a large number of youth services and a large number of services that support children from 12 to 25.

For me, I see the nine to 12 year old age group as a forgotten era. I think it is the area where they receive little funding, little support, and quite often some are children and some are young people, depending on their life experiences, and we need to allow the young people the flexibility to fit in where they best fit in. However, we do need more funding so that we can particularly look at this issue. We do know that the Better Futures Program is being implemented through the Department of Community Services, which targets the ages of nine to 12 years. However, funding is minimal. We know that in Sydney south-west they get \$90,000 per annum for the whole of south-west Sydney, which is from Fairfield, Bankstown, Liverpool, Wingecarribee, Macarthur and Bowral. \$90,000 does not go far but it is a good start, and at least they are being recognised. I think there need to be some more resources in this area.

I also think that if we are going to make a difference with young people we need to take a health promotion approach, which is addressing the issues through a range of angles and not relying on one program. I think we need a suite of activities; I am not sure exactly what they may look like, I am sure you will find out, but I think there needs to be a range of options for young people as they transition from children to young people. I would also like to particularly highlight some issues around the out-of-school-hours care and vacation care. I actually manage children's services here in Fairfield City. I look after 17 child care centres, which include vacation and out-of-school-hours care. The out-of-school-hours care targets children up to 12 years, and particularly targets child care, so unlike younger years, where it is about education, the out-of-school-hours care, particularly in this area, looks at child care for working families, although we do have some programs which do after hours homework help and things like that at our centres.

I guess the issue about out-of-school-hours care is particularly around the affordability, and I understand this is an Australian Government issue. I think there is a responsibility in the State Government to ensure that out-of-school-hours care is affordable. One of the things we know is that because the out-of-school-hours care and child care benefit is based on hours of service there is not a lot of support for parents; they do not receive a lot of discount in relation to child care benefit funding. Some of the anecdotal evidence that we have, and when we look at the number of children, there are reports of parents choosing to leave children at home from the age of 10 because they cannot afford child care. They make a decision about, "My child is becoming a young person. They are quite responsible and I think they are okay at home", but for me that personally poses some issues. But parents have no choice: they need to work. We have the highest housing affordability area here. Often there are two-parent families working and so children are being left at home. There needs to be some alternative options for parents and young people.

As well as the challenges with the out-of-school-hours care is how do you run one service that caters for five-year-olds and caters for 12-year-olds? The activities that they want to run are very different, but a ratio of one to 15 does not allow the services the opportunity to run a range of activities which meets the needs of the cohort. Again, I think there are some challenges with out-of-school-hours care about how they meet the needs of

both of those groups. If they are not doing things for the 10 to 12 year olds then they do not want to go, and if they are saying they do not want to go then the mums and dads are more likely not to send them. So there are some challenges there.

The other thing I would like to talk a little bit about is dental health. Tooth decay ranks as Australia's most preventable health problem, while gum disease ranks the fifth highest. In areas such as disadvantaged communities, tooth decay is a big challenge. We are unable to get local data and we are in the process of trying to negotiate with the health department to try and get some localised data. But what we do know is that tooth decay or dental health is not on the Medicare system, and certainly there should be some lobbying or some recommendations about including dental health on the medical system when it is a health issue and Australia's most preventable health problem. As well as that, I guess it is about the New South Wales Government providing additional health services. There are long waiting lists in this area to actually receive dental health care and the need to do preventative dental health care during this age group is key.

There is probably the whole range of other issues around parents which I would not mind just touching on. I think one of the things we need to do is support parents. Parents are out there; they are doing their best, particularly in this area. The children are growing, they are speaking English. Often the parents rely on the children to be their eyes and ears around what is happening and the parents are not losing control but feel out of control because the children are fitting into society and are experiencing things that they are not. We need to provide support for parents in how to deal with requests from this age group but also from an educational point of view.

These young people are going to school. They are doing English and maths, and the parents have often never been through our education system so that parents are unable to support them with school. We have an aspirational community. Parents want what they did not have for their kids and the support of parents for their kids to do well at school is there. The desire is there. We need to give them the tools so that they can help the children as well and be empowered.

CHAIR: Thank you. That was comprehensive and we appreciate it.

Ms VERGARA: Amanda's presentation was quite comprehensive and I would like to add a couple of comments. Fairfield has a high percentage of one-parent families as well. In 2001, from the state of the community report, the statistics show that there were 15.4 per cent of one-parent family households in the Fairfield local government area, and that is higher than greater Western Sydney, which had 13.2 per cent. That is quite evident in the clients that we see at our community centre, the families and the children. Obviously single parents have worries above and beyond two-parent households. A particular issue for us is around school holiday time. This places an extra burden on single-parent families where there is a lot of stress, and this is evident through our material assistance program where single parents come and say, "The school holidays are coming up". There are fees involved with school holiday programs, so I think funding for school holiday activities need to take that into consideration.

We have large families in our community that even paying a nominal fee may be a burden for them so that adds stress to their complex issues. We have identified that lack of parental support, peer pressure, parental divorce, bullying and other changes associated with poverty are the biggest challenges affecting children in this age group and also through our surveys and informal conversations with the children we have concluded that for children it is a feeling that they belong and a sense of ownership of the programs. So in planning and developing programs children need to be included even at that early stage at the eight or nine and above age group.

A lack of literacy amongst the parents is another issue that impacts on the children as well. Often parents do not understand the schooling system and that has an impact on the children as well. We see a lot of children whose parents do not speak English and they do not speak the language of the parents so there are communication issues as well. Often it is a challenge for the children to communicate with the parents at home as well. Another thing is access to the Internet. We have had lots of requests from children that Internet is not affordable for children. Going to the library sometimes is not an option, especially for single-parent families. There are transport issues. Paying \$2 per hour, as I said, may not be an option for a lot of families.

CHAIR: Is that what they pay at the library?

Ms VERGARA: At the library, yes, or whatever the fee is. That is the feedback we are getting. Then if there are any fees associated with printing and so forth, that is another issue. That is pretty much what I want to

say for now. There is one other point I would like to make. Going back to the lack of parental support, children have special needs or disabilities. We often find that siblings are caring for these children as well and we have had lots of requests for sibling support groups and I have a little bit of information that I can share it with you a bit later.

Ms DONADEL: Chester Hill is in Bankstown area and it probably very much reflects the same demographics as the Fairfield submission with multicultural and low socioeconomic area. Just a few other things. We run before and after school care, and we have noticed a lot of behavioural issues especially with boys in the age group nine to 12. Unfortunately we had to suspend them from after school care, which is not in the children's best interests or their families, but we do not have the staff at ratio 1:15 to deal individually with that. Therefore that child is then suspended for his behaviour; and if it is not dealt with then we have concerns as going on to high school just where that child will end up. It is not something that happens once a year; it is probably at least every term there are one or two children who fit into that category just in a small service like Chester Hill.

Bullying is probably at the background of some of the behavioural issues. Sometimes family breakdown but mostly it is bullying at school that we have tried to identify as behind it. Our vacation programs, it has been mentioned, are hard for a lot of families to access. We are licensed for 85 but that is fully booked with working parents who get the top priority. Non-working parents are lowest priority so it goes working parents, studying parents then non-working. Therefore we very seldom have any children from non-working families so therefore those children miss out on all the activities, excursions and learning activities and social activities that the others are getting at our vacation care program. That is a concern because the parents cannot afford to take them to things, even as simple as the zoo or the aquarium or sometimes even on a train. We have a lot of children who have never been on a train and would not know how to catch a train. So we try to do that for the older children rather than take them on a bus. We give them that experience of using public transport to equip them for life, otherwise they do not know.

We have a tutoring service for our youth programs and we have a lot of requests from children younger than 11 to attend but unfortunately we cannot fit them in and we have limited resources. But that has led to another issue of parents expecting over achievement from their children in the tutoring, where some of the children are going to school seven days a week. For five days they send them to tutoring after school, a cultural language school sometimes on Saturday and sometimes more tutoring on Sunday. So it is a form of abuse of children in a way, so we try to work on it as we can, a reasonable study plan and discuss it with the parents but that is an issue we have found. But generally there is a big demand for tutoring especially the children coming from households where the parents do not speak English and do not understand what is required of their children for homework or what the school's expectations are and they cannot read the notes that go home, behavioural letters that go home in English so they cannot read any of those and they are not aware that a lot of that is happening.

We have funding for a small group of children with a disability but it is very hard to find staff who are qualified to work with children with disabilities. So that impacts on those children because there are just no staff. We have advertised four times now since last November and have not come up with anyone with suitable qualifications to work with that age group. I support the Fairfield submission that children nought to eight are looked after quite well with the Families First funding and DOCS, and our youth programs have 11 to 24 but there is a missing age group there. So I just had to support that one.

Ms RICHARDSON: The area I work in is 13 to 19-year-olds, so this age group is only on the edge of what we are dealing with and it is a different level to what everyone else seems to be speaking about. We look at career and transition support for kids from school to work, so the focus tends to be on years 10 and 12 and the kids leaving at 15 and 16. However, some of the issues that have come up in working with our schools—and we work through State schools, independent and the Catholic systems so across the lot—is that there is not a lot of funding in schools for kids in years 7 and 8 to actually think about careers. It is left until years 9 and 10 and in a lot of the research that is being done years 7 and 8 are the time when the kids should be starting to think about it because then it affects their attitudes towards school when they get to the horrible stage in years 9 and 10. If there was more funding in schools for careers advisers, for example, who focus on years 10 and 12, and the in between ages just get left.

There are a lots of kids who leave when they turn 15 and often they do not even have a resume. They are not prepared for a job interview because they did not make it to year 10. A lot of the focus is on year 10. I know that a lot of our expectations of kids these days is that they will at least finish year 10 and the majority of

them finish year 12 but there is quite a gap there for the younger kids. I worked with a few of them last year from the PCYC. There were kids who had left school at 15 and had not completed year 8 and could not fill in a basic application form. They have slipped through the system. I am an ex-teacher so I will not lay all the blame at the foot of the education system. The problem is that there are probably a small group of kids who fit into that category but if there was more effort put into the years 7 and 8 kids to make them more work ready—they are often looking for part-time jobs at 15 and sometimes 14, but very little is done at school to prepare them for that.

In some areas that is not a big deal because parents can step in but you have heard of the background of the parents in our area. A lot of them do not speak English. A lot of them possibly do not have jobs so they do not know how to tell their kids to prepare for a job interview and have some life skills in that area. That can be quite difficult for our kids. On top of that the parents do not understand the education system so they often are the kids who are falling behind at school so they are even less likely to be job presentable and know anything about thinking about a career. Often the research shows that parents strangely enough are quite influential on children and the careers that they choose. As much as we all think it is their peers, when they have looked at some of the research in actual fact it is their parents and their teachers who have a big impact. If the parents cannot help the kids because they do not understand English or they are not aware of all the careers that are around these days—and since I have been in this industry my eyes have been completely opened to the range of careers and how jobs have changed.

We try to hold parent information nights and we try to get information out to the schools. We are getting there, and we are trying to bring in interpreters. It opens a whole difficult box, if you like. If you run a night and you have five different interpreters, you only get through a little bit of information because it takes so long for the whole thing to happen. So we are looking at ways of doing that. But resources need to be put into schools to cope with the different backgrounds of the parents in this area.

I went to a subject selection night recently and they had five interpreters and they asked people to sit in different parts of the room. The presentations had been cut down considerably, because you cannot talk to parents for an hour and a half if you have five different interpreters talking. So they cut it down considerably and left a lot more time for parents to wander around and speak to teachers. That is changing. I taught at the school eight years ago and that never happened. So things are changing, but the funding you need to do those sorts of things and to get notes home in different languages, most schools cannot cope. The schools in this area have 1,000-plus kids. In fact, some of the schools in this area would be the biggest in the State. I think Westfields or Prairiewood are possibly the biggest schools in the State, with 1,400, 1,500 or 1,600 kids. I only deal with the 12 schools in the Fairfield area. So it is huge in terms of the number of kids and parents and the sorts of things that are happening.

That is my main point. I would like to add to what has been said about child care and to refer to some anecdotal evidence; I do not have the statistics. A number of parents we speak to say to us, "What do I do with my 13 and 14-year-old?" There is no child care for those kids. As has been said, they are leaving them at home at 10 years of age. A lot of parents worry about leaving them at home at 12, 13 and 14. They cannot attend child care, and the age difference between them and a five-year-old in child care—it just does not work. But there is nowhere for those kids to go, unless they congregate around shopping centres where they end up in trouble and get told to move on. I am sure you will hear about them also congregating in libraries.

There is a real issue in our area with the number of young people and the number of parents who need to work, and the number of single-parent families, that those kids are not being catered for. They are the kids that get into crime, get into trouble and drop out of school early, because the whole system just has not been there to support them. Most of those kids possibly can stay home and not get into trouble, but a lot of kids just hang out with their friends and it just escalates. We might be unique in the sense that we have a large number of families with both parents having to work, and the physical distance that our parents travel to work means that they are not home until 6.30 or 7 o'clock at night. They do not catch the ferry to work and it takes them 20 minutes; they will sit in traffic for an hour and a half to two hours each way, each day. So those kids are not being catered for before and after school. Their parents might leave home at 6.30 or 7 o'clock in the morning. These kids have to get themselves to school, and often they do not, and there is nowhere for them to go after school.

I think it went round our email network recently about a father who was in his sixties coping with two children aged 13 and 15. Centrelink was pressuring him to stay at work and to keep finding work. He could not get the boys to go to school, but he was not there when they had to go to school. He was pulling his hair out, saying, "Look, I don't know what to do. I don't know where the help is." We were trying to find help for him.

But that sort of parental service, where there is something to help those kids that people expect are just going to go off and do the right thing and be independent, I think we need a lot of help with that in this area.

CHAIR: Thank you, Carol. That is precisely one of the issues we are interested in hearing about and addressing.

Ms BARTELS: I coordinate Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre, which is a settlement service agency covering the Fairfield local government area. We see people who have been here for longer than five years, but our primary target is newly arrived immigrants, refugees and humanitarian entrants who have arrived in the last five years. But, of course, you cannot say to a Vietnamese person who has a particular issue and he might have been here 10 years, "Sorry", so we see everyone. But we focus in our services on the newly arrived communities, which are Burmese, people from Iraq and people from Africa.

With the 9 to 14 years age group, the one thing that underpins all the difficulties and the issues that have been described is the stuff that goes on when you are 9 and moving onto 14: you are becoming an adult, you sleep more, you do not like the changes in your body, and your mental processes are slower and take different attention. This is not the case for young people who arrived through the refugee program who have experienced horrendous things and have seen things that any one of us around the table would never, ever want to see or experience, even from a remote control level. That clearly has an impact on their settling here, on basically being like any other kid. It also leaves a level of maturity that is far beyond the years of many of our 9 to 14-year-olds.

The kinds of issues we come across are both physical and emotional health, and role reversal, as is not uncommon with previous settlers, like refugees from Southeast Asia and even Italy. But parents always lack in the learning of English, and children learn it much quicker. But in this case, some of the children who go through the schools now, there have been things identified around their capacity to learn in a formal learning environment, which they have not had. Some of them have had interrupted schooling; some of them have had very little schooling, perhaps a year. I am talking about the African component. So there are literacy and numeracy issues, but in a different way. They are plonked into the relevant age class, but they kind of need to catch up—not only in the language but in the syllabus that is getting to them in the public schools. Sometimes there are behavioural issues—although I have not heard of many, but when there are they are quite serious. They relate back to emotional health in many cases.

Family sizes are quite challenging. When you have a large African family with a single parent come in, they are at risk. All the things we talk about, you have to double or triple the difficulty factor. The families also need to break up. They break up either because of family violence or because a young person receives the youth allowance and suddenly says, "I am on my own." They also break up because there is no accommodation that offers them to live as a family unit. If you have six or seven siblings and three of them are 16 to 18, they often have to move to a unit or house nearby. So that the natural course of the family is broken up, and that in itself has a multiple impact: siblings feel abandoned again, and all that kind of stuff, which does not lead to their being able to participate well.

There are issues of not enough interpreters or translations in the new languages that are coming into the country. Of course, we have a settlement program, and you cannot get those interpreters until people have been here for a while. We need to be a little bit stronger and more innovative. Particularly in school education, we need to try more and get the resources in there, and, as has been said, work with the parents a lot more.

There was a recent study into the impact of refugees in an African settlement through the Community Relations Commission. One of the things that was identified is that, with regard to the ESL ratio, it is very hard to teach a student. There are up to 60 students to one teacher. That makes me feel that that cannot really work. So the kids who are coming out when you see them are not exactly going to have those sorts of issues because there is just not enough support.

In the last budget the Commonwealth announced that it will put intensive English centres into primary schools, which is brilliant. It is exactly what is needed. But, of course, it cannot be like an intensive English centre for high school. I am hoping that when the State Government education works with immigration on setting these up, they are very clear on the specialist nature of this particular group of kids. So we have low literacy and numeracy, and interrupted schooling or little schooling. Very few services are provided on the ground in terms of assisting that age group in the school, both at primary and high school level, so there needs to be more homework assistance, more community-based remedial programs, as well as school-based remedial

programs. I do mean remedial learning in the way that we do, where some of us going through school—and you might not believe it, but I had a learning difficulty. It needs to be quite specialised.

In physical health, we see quite a lot of young people through our settlement service from both Iraq and Africa. With Iraq, the issue is that a large number of people coming through present with cancer. I am hoping that we will study this more. What can happen in a family is that you have more than one person having cancer. We have had a couple of families where an 18-year-old had cancer and the father recently died, so there is no relationship possibility for the 12 to 13 year old. The middle children are not looked after, and anticipate looking after the brother and the mother. So there is that caring role that they take on at a very young age. The kinds of physical health issues are iron deficiency, vitamin D deficiency, and sometimes parasites that show themselves physically on the skin.

There is one situation where a child has been harangued and bullied at school so he had to stay home until the bullies left. Family violence—I want to emphasise it is nothing particularly that you can target and say, "This ethnic community has a greater propensity to be violent in the family". Of course, there are many, many pressures that they have left behind and new pressures that they are facing. So, family violence often presents itself in the usual traditional spousal but also among siblings. The older male sibling is often taking the role of an absent father by death or because they are missing, and then takes that role traditionally very serious and maybe too much so without fully understanding the impact of the actions. Again, when you are nine to 14 you are incredibly impressionable and your level of interpreting what goes on around you is quite different to any other age. As you grow up and you hear this is not good and that is not good, you start to feel guilty and you start to integrate the problem when in fact you were part of that at the time where things happened to you, like physical violence or sexual violence or emotional violence.

In a family violence situation there are no services. We have a domestic violence support program, but there are no services that look after the children that are in that kind of a setting, and they are the ones that are going to grow up and either be very introverted and socially not very apt or confident or they are going to be victims themselves or they are going to be perpetrators. Yet we do not have anything that looks at that age group, and again, if such services get created there has to be a different layer of people of a core background.

CHAIR: We will have time to come back to some of these issues. Thank you, that was very comprehensive, as so many of the submissions have been. We might move on to Elaine.

Ms HIRST: I am General Manager of Community First Step. We operate programs for all age groups but particularly we operate children's services and youth services. We cover the ages from 0 to 25 across a broad range of services. Obviously everybody has quite eloquently by now said quite a lot of things that are very familiar to us too and we have a lot in common with. There are just a few issues I would like to add to that list. A lot of the evidence you have heard so far are factors that contribute to these issues. What we have found is disconnected families and the gap in the relationship between children of this age group and their parents, and that obviously emanates as behavioural issues at schools and in other services. We heard from the person for the kids help program, so they obviously hear a lot of those issues. That links in with a lack of counselling service that we feel there is in the area for this particular age group, and often youth workers are picking up crisis intervention work and often it is not their role and they are really not skilled to do that.

So it is about the quality of service that children in this age group and parents get. Often it is difficult for DOCS to respond to these issues because it is really not a high priority. Quite rightly, it is not their priority. But it is usually this early detection and intervention that is useful to be able to support and tackle the issue in terms of future connection with statutory services. The other issue that we find is low literacy and numeracy amongst children that are leaving school. We feel that there is a high level of school dropout in Fairfield. Certainly, if you look at the ABS stats from the 2006 census, approximately 39 per cent of children aged 15 and over have completed year 12 or equivalent and 90 per cent completed year 10 or equivalent. So there is quite a lot of evidence to support that, and particularly young girls. There was a local survey that I heard of in Fairfield amongst young high school girls, and their ambitions were to have children and families and not to work at all. I think there are cultural issues in that as well in this particular area.

One of the other things that we looked at is the lack of safe public space. It is particularly an issue in the CBD areas and it is also an issue that people have also talked about, about children being left unattended and unsupervised while their parents are at work because these parents had not any other option. That is something that we do have, sporadic activities in public parks, but there is nothing that is continuous and affordable. A lot of activities are not really affordable for parents and children in these areas. I guess that links us on to the

viability of services, and the link with that is also access to services and programs that are affordable again, and it is about services do need to obviously have fee income, a lot of them. Free services are very thin on the ground in this area where there is probably a very high need for free services to make services and opportunities for this age group equitable with parents who cannot afford to send them on sporting and other activities that are relevant. So it actually does mitigate against social inclusion, I think, and also equity in society. I think they are highly disadvantaged in this area, and that is including access to mainstream child care.

Ms BOURKE: From our perspective in the library I guess the major issues that we see fit very well with what everyone has already said. The issues are around literacy and language acquisition and support for students with homework and assignments, many parents not being able to help their children with those services. Opportunities for children to access computers and the Internet: Fairfield has one of the lowest take-ups of home computer usage and certainly Internet usage, certainly in Sydney and possibly in the State. Places for young people, as has been mentioned, just to be, to hang out—to be in some relatively safe environment in the community when lots of the parents are working or are otherwise unable to look after that particular age group because perhaps they are looking after the younger children, although we see in the libraries a lot of that age group, the nine to 14s, minding younger siblings, which is also quite a concerning issue.

In the whole area of recreation and leisure activities, free activities for these young people. We see as a public library that we have a space and we have the opportunity to offer services in these particular areas. Just on the issue of the Internet, we have free Internet access for research for young people and of course we have homework centres and online tutoring, and all of that is free. They do need to pay for printing—it is 20¢ a page, so it is not a huge cost, and of course they do not have to print things unless they really want to. So there are opportunities, but it is a drop in the ocean. We have this ability and public libraries across the State are doing perhaps not all that we do here, because the council is actually very passionate about this area, but are offering similar kinds of services but with very little other than local funding, which is fairly arbitrary by what happens in each local environment; it is not a statewide look at these issues and that is one of the things that concerns us.

So all of these things I think are issues of great importance. As we have discussed, these young people in this particular age group moving from primary school into high school, if they are already doing poorly at primary school because of their language and literacy issues, because they are not getting support at home—not from lack of wanting to but simply because parents cannot help them—how are they going to manage when they get to high school and the whole environment with so much more on them being independent learners? We think that the schools do a fantastic job. You heard some of the statistics about the non-English-speaking background percentages in our schools. Some of our schools are seeing up to 98 per cent of their students from non-English-speaking backgrounds—that is schools in Cabramatta and Canley Vale in particular.

A teacher who has a high school class in year 7 or year 8 with 25 or 30 students and maybe only one of them comes from an English-speaking background, that could be the best teacher in the world working in the best system in the world and the children are still falling through the cracks. So we see that we have an opportunity to provide services and we do: we run homework centres in four of our locations two evenings a week—these are free; we run family literacy programs in three of our centres, also free; we run on-line tutoring, which is accessible from anywhere kids can get access to the Internet, and that is also free. That deals with, still, a very small percentage of the children who need help. So some kind of bigger picture, statewide view, I think, would really impact positively in this area.

CHAIR: Thank you very much. Ashur?

Mr ISAAC: I work at the Assyrian Resource Centre where, much like the Fairfield Migrant Resource Centre, we work with newly arrived migrants between six months to five years—that is our main group. My position focuses on young people. We deal with a lot of issues that assist their settlement, provide education and do a lot of community development work. I have been doing that for about four years. What I will be speaking about is mainly in regards to newly arrived children and young people as well as the community I work for, which is the Assyrian community.

A lot of the points that have been mentioned here are very valid to the group of children and young people I work for. I want to underscore some of the points and maybe highlight some others. First of all I think there is a lot of good work being done in this region. Schools do tremendous work and many of the mainstream services do excellent work. However, when it comes to affordability or cultural sensitivity, because the people that are coming from these different backgrounds have specific issues or language issues, I think that is where there is a lack of engagement or access to the services. That could be done in a more effective manner and also

where isolation occurs. But for the work that I have done, I have seen issues relating to schooling with children and young people. Basically around young people being able to settle at school, being able to be mentored by someone within the school, perhaps standardising some of these programs that are provided for young people to assist them with orientation.

Importantly, I think, with regard to schooling, is the need to engage parents more effectively. Parents do miss out on a lot of information and do often have to rely on what their children communicate about any developments with regards to their performance at schools or difficulties with teachers or any school event, and I think that makes the parents disconnected with a significant proportion of their children's lives. What I have seen is when schools have tried to engage parents with information sessions and informed them about educational pathways and what they can expect from the school and how they can contact the school coordinator and get them to meet teachers, the more effective it is for parents to be a part of their children's life while they are at school and work with the schools in order to assist their children when they are going through difficulties.

I would like to highlight that multilingual teachers aides or teachers are of great assistance to these schools, especially when communicating the cultural backgrounds and behaviours of different groups of students who they work with. As noted, often English language acquisition is a major issue for these children and young people, particularly those who are entering high school straight away. I think there is probably a need with intensive English centres to not just do the great work that they do for a period of up to four terms and then move them on into mainstream schooling, because I think there are gaps. What should happen is a more rigorous process of assessing the competency of their students' language ability because when a significant portion of these students go into mainstream schooling just are not able to cope academically because of their ability of not being able to speak English well enough to understand the concepts that are being presented in their studies and subjects. That creates difficulty in terms of school retention down the track.

Importantly, as has been highlighted with the homework programs that are made available after school hours, I think one step further is not just homework support for groups but individuals. There need to be programs that do outreach to students' homes, supported through grants. When a student is identified as having difficulty and wanting to work on some of these issues, a tutor can be allocated to them for X number of hours for X number of months or whatever the need is. That is one way to help these specific students to overcome some of their learning difficulties. As noted, a lot of the young people and children from refugee backgrounds have had no structured education, and find having to discipline themselves to study—well, first of all, learn the language and then to study rigorously in order to succeed academically—is a difficult thing to do, plus deal with the expectations of their parents.

There was discussions earlier in the media about youth workers for schools. That would be a great thing if it is possible, for a position to work with parents, with school teachers, with local police, for specific students that have been identified as having high needs and at risk of not being able to cope at school and having difficulties in terms of relating to other students and teachers. Parents that I work with often cry out for a better understanding of how to parent their kids here in Australia. Back in the countries where they come from, it was fairly straightforward and it worked really well. But here they have a lot of difficulties. They complain about their children being freer and talking back and making independent decisions, not knowing what they are up to outside the home, and parents generally feel fairly powerless, especially as their children hit teenage years.

This is for Assyrian parents that I have worked with. They love coming to parenting programs where we talk about different interventions, different methods of communicating and relating and how to discipline in a way that will be more effective in terms of getting a young person's cooperation, rather than using corporal punishment or other methods. There is a great need for that, and certainly there has been a lot more of that being offered in this region that I have seen over the last year or so. But that is a big issue for parents. From a holistic point of view, when you support the family and the parents with the issues that present for them, that has a direct positive impact on children and young people.

The main other issue is in regard to crime minimisation. A lot of young people who fall out of the support structures or are not supported properly are exposed to high risk behaviours that get them in trouble with the law. That is what I have seen. The last point I want to mention is the need for greater casework hours. I am the only Assyrian youth worker in the Fairfield area, and we need positions allocated specifically for this community, for example, to support young people engaging other services, taking them to appointments, representing them and advocating on their behalf to other agencies that can provide them with skills and support.

Mr PHAM: I look after the Vietnamese community in Australia and links to learning coordinators. My duty is I look after the young children. Most of them are students at risk of early school leaver but I think in our community there are too many problems we need to solve. The first thing is that for new immigration for the people who have just come to Australia less than five years, they come together with the family and one or two children. They are aged between 8 to 20. The young people go to school with limited English speaking and cultural differences between two countries. So it is the main cause of creating the students at risk because it is hard for them to get along with the other students. It is very difficult for them to adapt with the culture, language and communication in Australia. That is why sometimes they do not want to attend school any more. But most of them, from years 7, 8, 9 or 10, it is very hard for them to participate in the formal learning program like TAFE or go back to school. My duty is to look after the early school leaver or student at risk.

Funding is provided from the department. I am trying to do my best to provide communication training for the young people not only in the Vietnamese non-English speaking background. Sometimes I tell them provide more training programs in the Vietnamese community like computer, sport activities, dancing, photography, outdoor activities or discussion to have them to get along with the education and to make a friend with others in our community, help them to improve their skills on culture, education, or help them how to deal with the people. It is very hard for them to return back to the education system because some of them do not have a year 10 certificate so when they go to TAFE it is very hard for them to complete their education and training program. At least the qualification is year 10 but they cannot finish year 10 any more because the English program or family breakdown or they cannot get support from parents because parents very limited about language or any study to help their children.

Only one source can support the young Vietnamese people is the Vietnamese community in Australia and the link to learning program. This program have them averaging about to do the hard work, tell them where to go to look for job. Most of the young people 15 to 18 but they still look for job. I ask them what kind of job would you like to apply, factory only, so that is either very hard to create a long-time implement for the young people. Some young people cannot concentrate or focus on their study because of English and all the issues in the community so they sometimes have the computer games, is waste time for young people, and lack of supervision from the parents. So I think we should provide more support services from library, support for them about any issues about the study, homework, to do any exercise. The most important thing is that provide all the discussion or outdoor activities. I think this is the link between all the activities and study for the young people because at this time they feel the study is not important for them and they prefer something else rather than studies.

The final thing is more support, more activities and for the young people from non-English speaking background, compared with the some three or four years before, this now improving or at least a bit better but we need to do more to make our community and our society better.

Mr AROCHE: We are a torture and trauma service. We work with people who have been exposed to extremes in terms of trauma and torture. One of the disturbing aspects of this is that lately the proportion of children between 9 and 14 years that we see as clients has increased, and that has been quite substantially in line with changes in migration programs, certainly bigger families from Africa with a lot more children. We have also seen a lot more children who have been directly affected themselves with the practice of torture and trauma in the countries they are coming from. The way this has come up, essentially the problems we see with the children are a super imposition of these problems and trauma, which has a direct impact on the brain and the nervous system, what we call a bio-psycho-social type of approach, and we see disturbances at all those levels. So we certainly see a lot of problems that would interfere with education and other areas such as things that interfere with kids' concentration, with their memory, with ability to concentrate at school.

There are also some other issues that are often not taken into account. Many kids we see have also learned to adapt to very unusual environments and those adaptations are sometimes counterproductive in a civic society and inconsistent. Those issues associated with trauma also go hand in hand with issues associated with migration, such as English difficulties, and also changes in what we call the normal life cycle. These are times when identity issues are being sorted out and there is interaction between the trauma, the migration and what is happening in the family.

We work with over 151 languages. It is a very heterogeneous group. Some of the kids we see have had access to good education, and in fact often put all their energies there. Other kids have had no access at all, particularly if they spent long times in refugee camps and so on. This is a gap that is very challenging for schools to deal with.

Another issue that is not well understood is that trauma impacts on the psychology; but what the latest research also indicates is that extreme trauma can affect the brain physiology, the brain structure. Sometimes the small proportion of kids who are affected in that way may need access to special approaches. We have been working actively with some schools on some of those approaches, and the results are very good, but it means you need to be able to identify and, in a way, unpack a lot of that complex interaction of problems to identify what is the best approach in each case.

I agree with everything that has been said about facilitating the transition from IECs into high school. For example, we find that with many kids, because of the issues around learning and because of their lack of exposure to a formal education system, they would need a lot more time in IECs, but that could be counter-productive in terms of having a dual education system for refugees and mainstream students. One of the answers would be to have more help in the transition, so they can transition earlier and continue to receive support that is necessary to overcome those challenges. I think it is a great idea to have the pilot we have in primary schools. Probably similar issues would arise in that setting and it would be good to pre-empt those.

Bullying and so on is quite an issue for the people we work with. Again, a lot of the programs that have been set up to address this are very welcome, and we need to be perhaps more specific in those approaches. For any refugee kids, their parents are their primary source of support. But their parents have also been affected by trauma and torture and are also dealing with a very difficult process in terms of linking into a new society. Again, programs that can assist parents to understand some of the concepts, which we often take for granted and on which our society and educational system are based, are really important. Some of the assumptions are quite different, and therefore that often translates into problems in supporting kids in the best way, and the best ways to discipline kids and to help in what is a very difficult transition process.

We see a lot of that, both because of the impact of trauma on parents and the impact on their behaviour and their ability to resource the family, but also because kids become a major interpreter of the new reality for parents. Sometimes that reality is distorted, both because of secondary gains for the kids and also just because their understanding of the new society can be quite difficult at times to explain to parents.

I also support some of the things that have been said about access to recreation. For many of these victims we see, some of the things we take for granted in terms of recreation are not available where they come from. The transition into those, and making them available, is very important. We have found this support an incredibly good way to link kids into new things. It is also a terribly good way to facilitate social inclusion. I mentioned before that identity is an issue. I am talking about identity in two levels, in terms of the identity as a growing adult but also identity in terms of where they sit. Are they Australian from a certain background? Often we work with minorities within minorities in their own country. Identity is quite a complex issue for them. We have found a sport activity is one of the best ways to facilitate that interaction and social inclusion.

I feel the interface with schools is also critical. We have been working in that area but there is a lot more work to be done. We are running a pilot with one liaison officer with schools, and a couple of youth workers have also worked in partnership with other organisations and so on. But because of the complexity of the issues and the specificity of some of the approaches that will work best—such as the approach I talked about, physiotherapy of the brain—you need to identify which kids are affected in that way. That interface is also crucial and something that needs to be a lot further developed. I could go on for another half an hour.

CHAIR: Thank you. We really appreciate your thoughts. We might come back to some of those issues with questions. We were due to finish at 12.30, but if suits people we might try to go through until 12.45 p.m., so we have an opportunity to explore, through questions from Committee members, some of the issues you have raised.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: A number of the organisations have spoken about children being left at home. Obviously, that is a problem where both parents are working, particularly with single mothers. What suggestions do you have to deal with that?

Ms DONADEL: I think a version of funded programs like the youth workers that we have but for the age group 9 to 12, but not fee-paying like after-school care, in a formal setting. It would need a bit more structure perhaps than, for example, drop-in youth centres have; perhaps somewhere in between the two.

Ms BRAY: It is an interesting challenge, and I am not sure that I have the answer. Having a service that ranges from 5 to 12 is a challenge. I guess the other challenge is that not all schools even have after-hours school services, so there is another issue there. But maybe if you split the service up, so there was a service that caters for the younger age group and the older age group and there was increased funding from the Government to support this style of care, with some flexibility around the middle ages of 8 to 12 so the children had choice on whether they went with the older kids or the younger kids. Some children grow up quicker and have different life experiences: they may be only 10 but they may be a young person, and someone may be 13 but they may be a child. We need to stop drawing lines in the sand and saying that they fit in this box. Perhaps separating the services is something we could explore.

Ms HIRST: In terms of OOSH services, I think the issue of affordability, being able to support free places for people who cannot afford the services. A lot of these people work, and there are children whose parents do not work. They are in the same situation in terms of being supervised.

Ms BRAY: With regard to affordability, I am a mum of children aged 9 and 6. If I put my children into before and after-school care, it is \$40 a day, so it is very expensive.

Ms VERGARA: I think we also need to include children with special needs and children with disabilities in these after-school programs, and finding better ways of doing that.

Mr STEVE CANSDELL: Firstly, thank you very much for the information you have given us. One message that comes through is for much stronger support services and programs for families, and that is going to take more funding. I think you have answered everything I wanted to ask about services and requirements, after-school care, et cetera. There are issues that, as I said, cross over indigenous communities, lower socioeconomic communities and mainstream communities. Thank you for your input.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: One thing we have heard from everyone is that what these children and their families seem to want is safe, free and flexible childcare, or a place to go which is safe, free and flexible. Parents and children are choosing it; it just happens to be in public libraries. Is that a reasonable summary of what they are using the libraries for?

Ms BOURKE: I think that is quite a reasonable summary. One of the issues, though, is that public libraries have a perception of safety, but they are public venues. Whoever may want to come into that venue, obviously we do not screen them in any way whatsoever. So, while we put measures in place for our staff and for the volunteers who work with us, and for the teachers who run our centres, the members of the public who come in are whoever they choose to be and have whatever interest they may have. It is one of the concerns we have. We offer a space for people to be, and a lot of families choose for their young people to come to the libraries after school because they do not have child care. So we have many young people in that age group, and in older age groups as well, but we certainly cannot guarantee that they are safe in that environment, although we do the best we can to supervise what happens. So it is an issue. I do not really see a solution to it. Library staff are certainly not child carers. They do not even fit under the Commission of Children and Young People Act as child-related employees. So it is certainly an issue of concern.

Dr ANDREW McDONALD: Is the demand increasing, say, in your homework centre?

Ms BOURKE: We had some extremely upset families yesterday at our family literacy class because the teacher had extended her class to 22—18 was the limit that we said was absolutely all she could manage. She is looking at children between year two and year six, so that is a huge group, age-wise, for that number, and there were parents who were desperate to get their children into that class and we just do not have space for them.

CHAIR: Jorge, you raised the importance of sport, both for social inclusion and also issues of identity. In your experience, how accessible are sporting programs for, particularly, the young people you are responsible for? Do you have any advice as to how we might be able to make them more accessible?

Mr AROCHE: I think it varies. I think it is one of the areas that is available to a certain extent. Children need to be able to feel confident enough to enjoy the sporting activities, and that is where probably we need better transition programs to introduce kids to those things that are available. We certainly run some with our client group, but we are really talking about an extended client group that increases in New South Wales by about 5,000. It is a group that increases every year. It is quite widespread, and not everyone has a problem that is

identified enough to be referred to our services. I am sure there are lots of kids in there who still are not taking advantage of as many of the sporting opportunities as they could.

I think it goes back to the issue of transition. It may be something that can be seen more as part of what IECs do, and it is part of what English as a second language-type programs do and may be able to use a sport as an activity in that sense. The other one is sporting opportunities through the refugee communities themselves. Basically it extends through community development and assisting communities to develop their own programs, and to identify that maybe there is a role to play. It may include the development of, say, a sporting team, but also the inclusion into the larger society.

There are many examples. One of STARTTS community development programs includes a team with African refugees. After a couple of years, we were able to arrange for that team to become part of a club. It is a very good example of how they went through, getting them to identify with people they are familiar with in sport, which is good for overcoming the trauma and their physical development, and so on, and making friends, and then translating that into something where they become a more integral part of the mainstream society.

Ms BRAY: Can I just add to that? One of the things about Fairfield City is we have the highest rates of type 2 diabetes and we have high rates of overweight and obesity. There is a study being done by Bill Randolph in the Fairfield area looking at the number of children of disadvantaged communities living in high-rise or high-density areas, and if you look at the metro strategies, that is going to increase. Bill Randolph says that the sad reality is that twice the proportion of children living in flats were living in a household with incomes under \$600 per week. I think that physical activity and the link to health and the way we urban design our cities is really important in the sense of health benefits for young children.

I have lived in Fairfield all my life and I am now lucky enough to work here, but one of the things I have seen is that when I grew up schools were open, basketball courts were usable on weekends, sporting fields were usable on weekends. Because of the fear of safety they are now all fenced. No schools, or very few schools, provide after-school sporting activities. Maybe there is a link there between the need to provide child care and the need to meet our needs around physical activity, and if we put those together there might be a solution that solves both issues.

Ms RICHARDSON: I would like to add to that that I live locally and work locally and in terms of the local clubs around here—of course, sport—just to play soccer, for example, you are looking at \$150 to \$200 as registration fees and then all the ongoing fundraising. I am a member of a club, so I have been involved in fundraising and things like that, and there is virtually zero that comes from government to support it. You are begging and going to local clubs and spending your time filling in application forms to try to beg the \$2,000 here, \$5,000 here. You are going to spend all your weekends running the canteen because you need to get the money in from the canteen. And keep in mind that you are talking about families that already have both parents working, travelling a long way to work and then they are going to meetings at seven or eight o'clock at night, often taking kids with them because there is no-one to mind the kids while they are at the meeting. I know that happens everywhere in Sydney but we do not have a high level of professional parents here, so you are looking at these parents who are already working often physically hard jobs all day coming home and running the local soccer club, and a lot of those parents are already putting in heaps and it is expensive for their kids to play. They are already working to keep the club alive.

I think there was some Federal funding for some equipment, and you could get a photocopier or a fax machine or something, but a lot of these parents their mobile phone bills are huge because they are the ones doing all the organising to get the kids there and stuff. They do it but those opportunities would not be there except for these parents flogging themselves to get those. Nothing happens in terms of government support for local sport in the local area, and I think that is a big area. If you are looking at obesity and you are looking at \$200 to play soccer, it is just not going to happen for a lot of our kids.

Ms BARTELS: Yes, and soccer is it—everybody loves soccer: all the African communities, and Iraq has a team that does very well in soccer. So there is a lot of social inclusion and being able to talk. But it is very expensive. I am concerned that we only raise sport as the form of inclusion. There are lots of people, young and old, that are not interested in any of those sports, particularly girls. There has not been much said about young women in the ages nine to 14. They are not into sports necessarily; they are into creative kinds of things— theatre, music—and I really think that is another way as well for social inclusion if we do it well.

I want to key in on the underutilisation of a wonderful resource: the schools. They are mostly shutdown and fenced in. I know, again, it costs money but if we can find a way to interface, to use Jorge's wonderful word, local government around local schools, the principals from the schools and the community sector, to try and overcome community services that work with children of that age and older young people as well. The school grounds are perfect, but public liability issues and all those things we need to resolve. But underutilisation of schools: if we can get better use it will go a long way.

Reverend the Hon. FRED NILE: Just following up the point you were making, Jorge, about the traumatised children, would there be sufficient children to warrant a centre for traumatised children in partnership with the education department and the health department in the Fairfield area?

Mr AROCHE: Hopefully, we are already fulfilling that role, particularly because I think that with children you have to also work with the parents. If I look at the services that we provide them and the increasing role of our client group, some of those services could be quite specific, as I mentioned before: identifying and working with the effects of trauma on the brain and brain physiology and so on. Others could be at the other extreme: working with groups, working with activities. Many of them would be working also with the parents. And, in fact, working with the family as a whole I think is crucial in terms of approaching these issues, because otherwise you sometimes can exacerbate some of the intra-family tensions. Just working with the children and facilitating their inclusion in society can also mean that they leave the parents behind. So, often working at both ends I think serves its purposes.

CHAIR: Before I close is there anything that anyone would like to add that has not been covered?

Ms BRAY: Just on behalf of the city I would like to thank Madam Chair and the Committee for having the hearing here today. It is fantastic that you have taken the time to come out to Fairfield and visit and you will see some of our services here today. I would just like to leave you with one last picture, because I think what we have done today is paint a pretty grim picture of Fairfield City. I love Fairfield City and I do not think it is that bad. I would just like to leave you with one lasting memory: Fairfield City is a harmonious place with very many cultures. Everyone loves to work here; everyone loves to live here. In fact, we are the number one choice for any migrants coming to Australia to live in Sydney.

Only yesterday I got an email from someone in Iraq saying they are about to come to Australia and they want to come to Fairfield City and could we provide them with information so that when they arrive they are linked in. Obviously, we will refer them to Ricci and to the organisations. But we are the number one selection and also the number one selection for people's second move upon arrival into Australia. Everyone is welcome. I just wanted to leave you with that lasting memory.

CHAIR: Thanks for that, Amanda, and thank you everyone for coming along and giving so much of your time to the roundtable this morning. We appreciate and understand that one of the purposes of something like this is that we hear about gaps in services; we do not always necessarily hear about what is working well. But from what all of you have said, we have also got a sense of some of the services and initiatives that are working really well for children between the ages of nine and 14. We certainly take what we hear in that context.

We start our next public hearing at 1.30 when we will hear from The Junction Works and then the Powerhouse Youth Theatre. I need to check if the representatives who have contributed to the roundtable are happy for the Committee to make public what they have said at the hearing today. Is that the case for everyone?

(The witnesses withdrew)

(The Committee adjourned at 12.40 p.m.)