

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

PUBLIC ACCOUNTABILITY COMMITTEE

**INQUIRY INTO NSW GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE
COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

CORRECTED

At Macquarie Room, Parliament House, Sydney, on Monday 17 August 2020

The Committee met at 9:30

PRESENT

The Hon. Robert Borsak (Deputy Chair)
The Hon. John Graham
The Hon. Courtney Houssos
The Hon. Trevor Khan
The Hon. Adam Searle
The Hon. Penny Sharpe
The Hon. Natalie Ward

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

Mr David Shoebridge (Chair)
The Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox

The ACTING CHAIR: Welcome to the ninth hearing of the Public Accountability Committee's inquiry into the Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic. The inquiry is intended to provide ongoing parliamentary oversight to the Government's response to the unfolding pandemic. Before I commence I acknowledge the Gadigal people, who are the traditional custodians of the land. I also pay my respects to Elders past and present of the Eora nation and extend that respect to other Aboriginal peoples present.

Today marks the beginning of the next phase of hearings for this inquiry. This morning we will hear evidence from non-government organisations as the voices for vulnerable communities and households experiencing financial hardship and housing stress as a result of the pandemic. Since the start of the crisis we have heard a lot about the toll of the pandemic, described in sobering numbers and statistics. What is often missing are the in-depth insights from a grassroots level which better illustrate the true human cost of the pandemic, insights that put a human face to the statistics and indicators. These insights form the focus of this morning's session.

Today's hearing is being broadcast live via the Parliament's website. The transcript of today's hearing will be placed on the Committee's website when it becomes available. I remind media representatives that they must take full responsibility for what they publish about the Committee's proceedings. It is important to remember that parliamentary privilege does not apply to what witnesses may say outside of their evidence at the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about any comments they may make to the media or to others after they complete their evidence, as such comments would not be protected by parliamentary privilege if another person decided to take an action for defamation. The guidelines for the broadcast of proceedings are available from the secretariat. All witnesses have a right to procedural fairness, according to the Procedural Fairness Resolution adopted by the House in 2018.

There may be some questions that a witness could only answer if they had more time or with certain documents to hand. In those circumstances, witnesses are advised that they can take the question on notice and provide an answer within 21 days. I remind everyone that Committee hearings are not intended to provide a forum for people to make adverse reflections about others under the protection of parliamentary privilege. I therefore request that witnesses focus on the issues raised by the terms of reference of the inquiry and avoid naming individuals unnecessarily.

JOANNA QUILTY, Chief Executive Officer, NSW Council of Social Services, affirmed and examined
LEO PATTERSON ROSS, Chief Executive Officer, Tenants' Union of NSW, affirmed and examined
KATHERINE McKERNAN, Chief Executive Officer, Homelessness NSW, affirmed and examined
LUCY BURGMANN, Country Manager Australia, Community Housing Ltd, affirmed and examined

The ACTING CHAIR: I welcome our witnesses. Would any of the witnesses present like to make a short opening statement of no more than a couple of minutes?

Ms QUILTY: Thank you, Chair, for the opportunity to appear with my colleagues today. As you know, the NSW Council of Social Service works for people experiencing poverty and disadvantage and is the peak body for the social and community services sector in New South Wales. It has certainly been a very difficult year for people in New South Wales and it is not over yet. Many have lost loved ones, they have lost livelihoods and they are facing years of uncertainty. But we know that many people were already doing it tough before COVID-19 struck. When we released our *Mapping Economic Disadvantage in New South Wales* report in October 2019 we knew that there were close to 900,000 people in New South Wales living below the poverty line.

The analysis told us that women experience higher poverty rates than men, and that children are the age group most likely to be impacted; that there is wide variation in the distribution of poverty across New South Wales; that having a job does not make you immune to disadvantage; and that it is renters, whether in the social housing system or the private market, that are the housing tenure most likely to live below the poverty line. These statistics were further borne out by our cost of living survey, also conducted pre-COVID in 2019. Our survey included households on moderate as well as low incomes and people in the workforce as well as those out of it. The results of the survey made it clear that across the board many households were feeling the pinch and that the big killer was housing costs leaving a huge hole in the weekly budget.

The survey results highlighted the quite drastic steps that households take to manage cost of living pressures, such as limiting their use of energy, selling items for cash and going without meals, and that financial hardship is associated with reduced contact with family and friends. If things were grim for many households in New South Wales before COVID, our concern is that they are about to get a whole lot worse. At the moment, JobKeeper and the JobSeeker supplement are cushioning the blow, but we know that as these measures taper off—and, indeed, potentially disappear altogether—more households are going to be thrown into very dire circumstances. It is those who were already in precarious positions who will be hardest hit, on top of whole new cohorts who will be experiencing hardship for the first time. As disadvantage rises, so too will demand for support from the social services sector.

Our sector has done a really amazing job in stepping up and collaborating with the Government to find solutions, keep vulnerable people safe and continue to provide essential services under difficult circumstances. But we know that when times are tough and economies are under pressure governments often adopt austerity budgets that impact most severely on those without economic means. We are also concerned that an austerity budget will have adverse consequences for a social services sector already at capacity and looking down the barrel of a huge surge in demand. There is no doubt that the New South Wales Government has provided strong leadership and, in the main, an effective health-led response to the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic, but we need to turn our attention to the long game. One practical thing that the New South Wales Government could do to deliver longer-term benefits—to lessen disadvantage, ease the load on the social services system, create jobs in the residential construction industry and build public assets of lasting value—is to seriously invest in social and affordable housing.

We are hoping that proposals already put forward by a coalition of peak bodies—the main one being establishment of a social and affordable housing capital fund as the vehicle to supply 5,000 additional units of social housing every year for the next 10 years—are receiving serious consideration and that they will get the support and the financial backing that they deserve. It is an effective fiscal policy lever that the State Government has at its disposal, and it will address the social and economic challenges we are facing and deliver long-term benefit for the people of New South Wales when it is needed most.

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: I thank the Committee. I also acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. The Tenants' Union of NSW is the peak body representing the tenant's interests in New South Wales. We are a resourcing body for a statewide network of tenants advice and advocacy services and we are a community legal centre specialising in residential renting laws. We have been assisting people with the effects of COVID-19 since late January, when international students and others affected by travel bans began to be unable to travel back

to New South Wales to perform their legal contracts. As the pandemic grew we began to see people in tourism and hospitality also affected, and then an expanding of related employment types from there. By the end of March we were talking to people already sleeping in their cars because they could not afford to make the rent.

The experience of policy development during this period was very difficult. I acknowledge Ministers, their staff and departments for trying to do their best in a very tough situation. One of the barriers to policy development was and still is not having sufficient data to show the needs and the effects of policy changes. In New South Wales, and Australia generally, Government simply does not know the answers to some very fundamental questions about our rental system. For instance, no-one can answer how many tenants are evicted in any given week, let alone why they are being evicted or why anyone is moving. This is slowly improving. Since 2016 the New South Wales Government has been releasing bonds data in an open-source way. That has enabled us to be able to get better transparency. We are awaiting the release of the bond exit survey, which I can talk about more. But more needs to be done to give transparency and understanding of the sector in order to be able to make the decisions that we know need to be made.

One thing we can see is that many people have needed to move out, losing their whole bond, which means they have either paid a break fee to break a contract early or they are in significant rent arrears. Some 4,318 people moved out and lost their whole bond in April, May and June this year in the inner ring of Sydney. That is more than twice as many as the same period last year. The Tenants' Advice and Advocacy Program [TAAP] did receive a one-year increase of \$2½ million, or just over about 20 per cent of the total program funding, which translates to the equivalent of about 20 extra people answering phones and helping people with their tenancy problems. However, the TAAP has not received a funding increase in real terms for more than 15 years. In that time the number of people renting has increased by more than 50 per cent. That means that we estimate a funding shortfall exists every year of about \$5 million. While the extra funding was very useful and very valuable, it was still plugging a gap that already existed.

This pandemic has again proven the importance of this information, the advice and the advocacy that the workers give. In just one month our *Renters' Guide to COVID-19* served 1.2 million sessions. The number of callers to the Tenant's Advice and Advocacy Program services who are having trouble paying rent rose from our average of about one in five to one in three in the April to June quarter, which are the most recent statistics I have. Our worries, going forward, are the ending of the eviction moratorium in October. This legislative response for tenants during COVID was a fairly limited change from the Residential Tenancies Act 2010. It required landlords to show that they had attempted negotiation before evicting tenants who are defined as "COVID-impacted" for rent arrears and it lengthened the period of time for the end of fixed-term tenancy agreements. This support will end just weeks after the Federal income support changes and tenants and landlords will need to be renegotiating already difficult rent reduction negotiations without the framework and support that has been put in place. We are very worried that that will put everybody in a much tougher position.

Our response in New South Wales did not prevent financial harm for many people, but it did prevent a wave of homelessness in the first round. We do need to make sure that that does not occur in the second tranche. I note that this week the NSW Civil and Administrative Tribunal actually has extended its phone hearings until at least the end of the year. That means that it will be hearing and making decisions about whether someone needs to be forced to leave their home, without thinking it is safe enough for someone to leave their home to come in to the tribunal. I think we need a consistency in decision-making and a consistency in messaging about what is safe and what is appropriate during this pandemic.

Ms McKERNAN: Thank you very much for this opportunity. I also acknowledge that we are on the Gadigal land of the Eora nation. Homelessness NSW Inc. is the peak organisation representing around 120 homelessness services across the State, ranging from large charitable organisations right down to small locally based services. New South Wales was facing a homelessness crisis prior to the pandemic. It increased by 37 per cent in 2011 to 2016 in the State, compared to 14 per cent nationally. Services in 2018-19 supported over 73,000 clients, which is 27 per cent more than they are actually contracted and funded to work with. More clients are unable to access crisis accommodation than accepted, and even if supported by a homelessness service two in three are still homeless after support. Services are exhausted and tired, and they have also this year had to deal with bushfires alongside the pandemic.

Addressing homelessness is critical to the success of a health-based approach to the pandemic, given the lack of ability to isolate and socially distance for those rough sleeping or in shared crisis accommodation, or those at risk of homelessness. The New South Wales Government has done a really fantastic job in securing funding to provide additional funding for hotel accommodation, rental subsidies and supportive housing for people sleeping rough. We have seen \$72 million provided to the service system during the course of the pandemic to address

these issues. The sector and the department have worked intensively and collaboratively to keep people healthy and well, with reconfiguring crisis accommodation, moving thousands into hotels and now working to house people. This has been incredibly positive, and we are all keen to maintain a solutions-focused and collaborative approach going forward.

However, the issues that were in the system prior to the pandemic have created significant barriers during the process of working with people during the pandemic. As my colleagues said, one of the main issues was a lack of joined-up data and referral systems, which created gaps in supporting clients. We had overly administrative processes for accessing hotels, causing anxiety and uncertainty for clients and a huge amount of work for homelessness services and department staff in managing. This meant that many clients returned to rough sleeping because of the gaps. We had an underfunded service system, meaning services have done all this work with limited additional resources and are at risk of burnout and exhaustion and the challenge of the increasing complexity of trauma experienced by people who they are working with.

There has been a lack of Aboriginal specialist services in the system for many years, and to provide culturally safe approaches for Aboriginal people during this period has been incredibly challenging. Some 30 per cent of all clients in homelessness services are Aboriginal and a significant number of people sleeping rough are Aboriginal. There was also a lack of a joined-up approach between Health, Housing and Justice, so we found challenges as well for people leaving prison, in terms of making sure that they have housing and support to go to once they have exited prison. As my colleagues have said, we are seeing new cohorts of people experiencing homelessness during this period, particularly non-citizens and single mums who are impacted by either lack of access to services or loss of income and high rents. Some 39 per cent of services have reported an increase in demand during this period.

As mentioned by Ms Quilty, the cuts to JobSeeker and JobKeeper are looking like creating a huge demand for homelessness services in the next six months. Modelling that we have done with Equity Economics predicts there could be up to 16,000 additional people experiencing homelessness due to the economic impacts of COVID and with any reduction of JobSeeker. The biggest issues we have are a lack of social housing and an underfunded service system. We are using existing resources—apart from the \$72 million, which is great to receive—to scramble to provide outcomes. We need an investment of 50,000 social housing properties and we need an increase of funding to homelessness services to help them provide the support to clients who need it. What we have shown during this period is that we can end homelessness; we just need the investment, the resources and the will to do it. I think what would be really great is to see that activity continue over a long term so that we can really end homelessness in New South Wales.

Dr BURGMANN: I acknowledge that we are meeting on Gadigal land and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging. Community Housing Ltd [CHL] is the largest not-for-profit housing provider in Australia. We provide affordable housing to vulnerable and low- and moderate-income people who are unable to secure affordable rental housing in the private rental sector. We provide services across six States in Australia, as well as seven overseas jurisdictions. Here in New South Wales we manage a diverse portfolio of social and affordable housing, housing for Aboriginal people and specialist disability accommodation, from Bega in the south to Lismore in the north. The vast majority of our services are based on the mid North Coast around Port Macquarie and Kempsey. Over 4,700 people live in a CHL property in New South Wales and we serve over 1,000 people seeking housing assistance every year as well.

CHL was very pleased that the Committee is choosing to focus this element of the hearings on housing and homelessness, amongst its very broad terms of reference. These are important public policy areas at all times. With increasing concerns about the ability of low-income and vulnerable people to stay safe and stay out of poverty the imperative to provide safe, affordable, appropriate housing has never been more apparent. For all the creditable efforts of the New South Wales Government focused on homelessness prevention, new supply for new social and affordable housing remains quite a gap.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thank you. Before we proceed to questions, I indicate that as well as the Committee members here in the room we have Mr David Shoebridge and the Hon. Matthew Mason-Cox participating by phone. Mr Shoebridge is in fact the Chair of this inquiry, but he is unable to attend today due to being in isolation while he awaits his COVID-19 test results. In the interim the Committee has asked me to chair the inquiry until the Deputy Chair should arrive. But after consultation he informs me that he is happy for me to continue. Until my credit with the Committee runs out, I will proceed.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can I just say, on behalf of all of us, we want to thank the work that the community sector has done during what has been a very difficult time. There are a number of questions that I wanted to ask and you touched quite a lot of it in your opening statement. The one thing I did want to ask is: You

have talked about how important JobKeeper and JobSeeker are. I am just wondering whether you can just elaborate in terms of the people who have fallen through the gaps? So, international students, temporary—where are the people that are hidden, really, who are really doing it tough and who do not have access to any of the extra support? What are your services seeing in terms of the people that are coming forward?

Ms QUILTY: Certainly we are aware that there are various groups that are falling through the cracks. As you mentioned, asylum seekers and refugees who do not have access to income support and other measures that are available are certainly a cohort around which there is a lot of concern. We also know that people with disabilities have tended to not receive the attention that they need to during this pandemic. They are a group that are more likely to live in poverty, who are less likely to own their own home and who are extremely vulnerable.

They have been at risk not just in terms of the health impacts of the pandemic but also in terms of social isolation and not being able to access the usual services and supports that would assist them. We also know that social housing tenants are a very vulnerable population group—that often they are elderly, they can have chronic health conditions, they can also have disabilities, and that they tend to not receive the wraparound supports that would assist them to fully participate in the community. I think this pandemic has really highlighted the cracks in our system and, as you say, the people that are at risk of falling through those cracks.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can I just follow up the disability question? This has been the first test, really, of the NDIS versus other support services. Have you seen emerging gaps in terms of what was State provision and now that sort of idea that an individual is completely responsible for managing their own process? Has that demonstrated some gaps that have emerged?

Ms QUILTY: I think it absolutely has. We know that only 10 per cent of people with a disability will be eligible for the NDIS, so there is a huge proportion of people in New South Wales with a disability who are in fact not eligible for it. But even to be eligible and to qualify for the NDIS, you have got to have a really high degree of persistence in order to navigate what is a really complex system. We suspect that there are many people out there—very vulnerable people who may be in social housing, who may in fact be homeless or living in inadequate conditions—who should qualify for the NDIS but who are not able to navigate that system, who do not have any support that would help them, and who are therefore being placed at further risk because they are not getting those supports and that assistance that would help them to live a life that has higher quality.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thanks. Mr Patterson Ross, the Government announced a range of measures to support tenants and landlords through the process. Obviously there is the land tax reduction, which we know is very undersubscribed. Would you be able to tell the Committee what your experience through the calls were in terms of resolving issues with landlords and tenants? I suspect you may not be able to. What has been reported to us is that lots of tenants were seeking rent reductions and they just have not been forthcoming and they have been at a stalemate. Is it also the case that the moratorium is sort of holding that off, but we could see a wave of problems? If you could, just comment generally on what the Government promised versus how useful that has been for tenants and landlords to put in practice.

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: Thank you. As you know, our response in the residential tenancy sector is largely to encourage negotiation between the parties, with a requirement for landlords who want to evict for rent arrears to have to have shown that they have negotiated before that process would proceed all the way through the tribunal. We saw a range of differences across the time frame. Very early on we saw landlords coming forward and offering rent reductions and saying, "Look, I have enough money. I'm okay. Can I help you?" We saw a limited number of that at the very beginning. That dried up very quickly. Then while we were waiting for the announcements and the specifics of the program we did see a lot of offers of rent referral rather than rent waiver. So, sometimes tenants would be told, "Look, pay what you can and then you can fix it up later."

A rent deferral, unfortunately, is just rent arrears by another name. It is sitting there waiting and if you do not pay it you are going to be evicted. So, it is not going to solve the financial problem for someone unless they have a reasonable expectation that their employment will gain them more income after the pandemic than they were receiving beforehand. That is unlikely for the vast majority of people. Once the eviction moratorium came in we still saw a big push from the industry generally towards rent deferrals. It was not until we were able—NSW Fair Trading, through the Customer Service cluster, was able to clarify that they really did mean waivers. Landlords and agents started to take the negotiation process somewhat more seriously.

As you know, we also had a two-phase moratorium. The first two months was—you could not be evicted at all for rent arrears if you were defined as COVID-impacted. The second phase that was June until October is where the tribunal must be convinced that a negotiation occurred. For the first two months there was negotiation happening but there was no test through the tribunal, so no-one really knew what the tribunal would take into

consideration about what constituted good faith. And so, there was still a lot of uncertainty about how that process would look. Fairly small numbers have gone through the tribunal on a rent negotiation platform, largely because what the eviction moratorium did not do was prevent eviction for other reasons than rent arrears—so, no grounds evictions and end of fixed terms, which are also no grounds, where you do not have to give a reason. You do not have to show that you have negotiated. These tools were still available to a landlord who did not particularly want to negotiate.

I think I will just also point to—the model assumed that a landlord would want to evict a tenant. Actually if you are a landlord in the eastern suburbs or the inner ring of the CBD and you are seeing vacancy rates shoot up, it actually becomes not the most rational choice to evict that tenant because if you do not evict them you have at least a paper debt. They do owe you the money. If you evict them you have got a vacant property that you may not be able to fill. And so, what we did start seeing as well was a lot of landlords choosing not to go down the route of an eviction but just sitting back and waiting while the rent arrears debt grew and hoping that either that tenant would find employment soon and be able to pay back that arrears debt, or that some support from Government—some financial support—would kick in and they would be able to take that to offset the debt. Whereas, if they were sitting with a vacant property they would not have those options as likely.

We saw some what might be seen as perverse kind of responses, but they are rational if you put yourself in the landlords shoes and consider—what is the least risky move? Our system did not allow for that. One of the big flaws in our system compared to other States and other jurisdictions is that nowhere at Fair Trading or the tribunal can an independent arbiter say, "This is what the rent reduction should be. You have done your best. You have had a go at both sides. You're not clear where you are at. This is what it should be. We've taken into account all the things." At the tribunal a landlord just gets a binary, "Yes, you've done enough," or, "No, you haven't. Go away and try again."

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, okay. So there is no room there.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Can I just ask a follow-up question?

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: Yes.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: You can tell me I am wrong because [inaudible]. It seems to me, at least in the eastern suburbs and the centre of Sydney, that two things are happening. Well, perhaps three things are happening. The first thing is: There seems to be, as you already indicated, an increasing level of vacancy of particularly units. Could I suggest that part of that is that the vacancy is caused by a move away from Airbnb at the moment? Unit accommodation that previously was not available to renters is suddenly available because there is no Airbnb market, or a very reduced Airbnb market. That being the case, what we are seeing, again at least in the eastern suburbs and the centre of Sydney, is a reduction in rents, and not insignificant reductions. Is that correct?

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: The median rent has fallen—I will come back to the Airbnb question—but the median rent has fallen. When you start stratifying the sector—and we can do this through the bonds lodgement—the lower rents, so the lower quintile, have not really shifted so much.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Is that because—I am sorry, I am interrupting.

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: What it is, is actually the top end, and that brings the median down. The Airbnb question is tricky. In Sydney there has been a large debate coming. I think this Committee, certainly many of you on it, have been considering the short-term rental legislation. This is another area where we do not have transparency. The big flaw in most of the studies around the Airbnb or short-term letting in Sydney, and actually across the world, is people do not know what the property was being used for before it went to Airbnb and what it is being used for in between Airbnb stays. It may be an owner-occupied property, they vacate on the weekend, they do that every weekend, but it is actually their home the rest of the time. We do not have any way of telling whether it is that case or a completely commercial quasi hotel set up.

They make significant differences to the response in, for instance, a reduction in tourism, if it is the owner-occupied property where they are losing some extra income, but actually they were still living in the property does not change the vacancy rate at all, whereas the quasi commercial hotel is decimated. When we talk about those vacancy rates, I think that certainly some of them will have shifted from short-term letting. The other change we are seeing in the short-term letting market is people have moved to residential tenancy agreements of three months. They are still advertising that it is for lease, and actually that brings properties on to the market but not in the same way that a genuine tenancy would. This points to a flaw in the vacancy rate methodology. It is only measuring properties that are available for rent and how many of them are there, compared to the—*the Real*

Estate Institute's methodology is the real estate agent's rent roll, then looking at the vacant properties that they have.

It does not look at, for instance, a property that a landlord has just withdrawn from the market and is sitting vacant. The SQM methodology is slightly different, looks at online listings and compares it more to the overall properties, but again there is no transparency behind the limited sources that people are using to try and get the best answer that they can. I would not be very confident about saying what caused the particular vacancy. We also know that there were international students, we know that there are backpackers, there are a whole lot of people who live in some of these areas who have gone home. The other big trend that we have seen is people moving in with family if they can. They might have been living in Bondi, but as COVID hit they were not able to afford their rent. They went back to mum and dad's in Epping or Parramatta, or wherever. I think the other important thing to say is yes, I think you touched on this, the inner ring vacancy rates have shot up. It is actually the tightest markets we have seen for years in places like Penrith and Campbelltown. Vacancy rates have gone really, really low.

I think that is also because people have moved out of the expensive areas where the rents have fallen, but they have not fallen anywhere near enough, so they have moved to the more affordable areas of Sydney. Actually now if you are trying to move there, if you already lived in Penrith and trying to find a new home, you are going to find it even harder than you were a year ago.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: This is really a State comparison. Other States have provided hardship payments for tenants to overcome that. That was not the case in New South Wales. Do you think that there is some value in providing that, given what you have seen with the pattern of evictions and the difficulties that tenants have been in?

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: New South Wales did provide one payment, which was the Rent Choice Assist for COVID-19, which a very limited number of people could apply for and it was open for a short time. Its purpose was much more directly in preventing homelessness, rather than alleviating financial stress at the time. Worth putting on the record that there was a program that existed—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Remind me how much that was and how long it was open for?

Ms McKERNAN: It was part of the \$20 million that came for the rental subsidy, so it is part of the rental subsidy program. I think we have to take on notice what the actual amount was.

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: It would change, we would need advice from the department about what they assessed the need at, but it was significant, more significant than any of the other financial hardship payments. One of the difficulties of the rent relief payments from the other States and applying it here, we do need an independent arbiter of what the rent should be to ensure that the rent relief payment is targeted and effective. We adopted a negotiation framework and if we go down that path, rather than simply reducing rents to affordable levels, then we need to make sure that that is done together.

One of the flaws I point to, for instance, is that in some of the States you had to negotiate, you have come out of the process, you still owe an unaffordable rental level, you get this payment, which is the equivalent of a few weeks, potentially, for whatever period it ends up being because of the size of your rent negotiation, then it goes away and you are left with a rent that you cannot afford. Although you have the relief for some time, it was going to end and then you were going to be in hardship. It might have delayed the problems for you. I think it assumed that COVID would go away quickly. I think that model assumed that we would be done by now, essentially.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Ms McKernan, I know the amount of work that has happened in the homelessness sector and, to give the Government credit, it has actually been quite extraordinary. Things that were previously thought impossible have become possible. I am interested in what you think now as we are going on and people are not staying in the hotels, there are more people in the street, there is an increased demand. We have shown it is possible to get people off the street. How do we find them somewhere secure and safe into the future?

Ms McKERNAN: Yes. What is going to solve it is a considerable investment in social housing. As we have mentioned, we need 50,000 properties just to meet current demand, that is not with increased demand. A long-term investment in social housing would make a really big difference; then structuring the system so that we are actually providing support to tenants, rather than focusing on the crisis space; really looking at expanding Together Home, which is the \$36 million that was announced for rough sleepers; providing support for housing, providing that in a long-term way for people sleeping rough, but also for any tenant that requires support to maintain their tenancy. That is really what will end homelessness. We can do it. We have seen it in New South

Wales, we have seen it in other States in Australia. There has been huge, huge gains made in terms of providing housing for people. And we have seen it internationally. We know how to do it, we just need to.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: In terms of ongoing funding in the budget this year, I am very familiar with the NSW Council of Social Service's work and the \$5,000 a year for 10 years, which I will come back to in a minute. The money that has been provided, the \$73 million, which is all of those breakdowns, that is time limited I assume?

Ms McKERNAN: Yes, it is time limited. To get a home is time limited for two years and the other funding was essentially to meet the crisis, so rental subsidies, which are time limited as well, and then to provide hotel accommodation. It is time limited and it has been an add on to an under-resourced system. What we need is to resource the services, which means providing social housing to make things work. We have done an incredible job, the Government has done an incredible job, I have to say, in this period, but we have all been scrambling because we were under-resourced to start with. We have been making things work as best we can and getting much needed temporary funds and funds on top. What we need is for the system to be resourced adequately so we can provide the right housing and the right support to people.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Ms Quilty, I was going to ask you to take us through a little more of the work that you have done around the 5,000 a year for 10 years and around jobs creation and ask you where it is up to in the system with government.

Ms QUILTY: We know that the downturn in national migration is going to really put jobs in the residential construction industry at risk. I think there are something like 85,000 jobs that will potentially go. There is also a flow-on effect to small and medium enterprises across New South Wales; something like 97,000 small-to medium-sized businesses could be at risk of closing their doors because of the downturn in residential housing construction. We also know, from evidence looking at previous economic downturns, that the recovery measures that are most effective are those that can be rolled out quickly, that focus on jobs and employment and business and that can also fill infrastructure gaps. Certainly, investing in social housing is a no-brainer when you look at what we are trying to achieve and the fact that it does tick all those boxes. As Ms McKernan said, the 5,000 is really just to meet existing demand. It is to meet the backlog.

We know that there is a waiting list of 50,000 for social housing in New South Wales and that the available social housing stock has not kept pace with population growth. Simply to have it at a level where it can meet demand and really help those very, very vulnerable households that are otherwise facing living in overcrowded conditions, living in really inadequate accommodation, having to live in areas that are not well located and not close to transport and amenities and services—in order to avoid that situation and to really support these families, we do need that investment, as a minimum, of 5,000 social housing units each year for the next 10 years. Our estimation is that that will cost around \$1.88 billion for the 5,000—that would, of course, need to be multiplied over the 10 years—but that it does deliver those significant economic and social benefits at a time when it is desperately needed.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: That deals with existing demand. One of the figures that was raised in the opening statements is the potential for 16,000 extra people to experience homelessness in this crisis. How does the system cope if that scenario unfolds? What would be required to hold things together under those circumstances?

Ms McKERNAN: The system will not cope. The system is barely coping at the moment. Before Christmas the sector was feeling incredibly overworked and exhausted and received one-year continuity of contract rather than long-term contracts and was feeling really kind of despairing and has now been hit with bushfires and the pandemic. It has done a fantastic job and really worked very well with government and so on. But we have already seen that around 39 per cent of services are reporting an increased demand. There just is not the housing to provide to people. There also is not a prevention focus. We need to not only have the social housing investment, but we also need to look at preventing people from becoming homeless—that is, I think, to the information that Mr Patterson Ross was providing around people in the private rental market.

The new clients we are seeing are, as has been mentioned, non-citizens but also single mums who were working in casual jobs and were sharing houses with other single mums and just getting by. The pandemic has just thrown them completely out and they are having to access services for the first time. We are anticipating that we will see more and more people who have never been in contact with the service system before, who really just need rent. They need to be able to have incomes and affordable rent so that they can actually live. They do not necessarily have the support needs that you would traditionally think of for people experiencing homelessness; it is just they need to have adequate income and affordable rents. We need to see JobSeeker and JobKeeper extended

for as long as possible and we need to be looking at social housing for those who will need it, but also looking at how the rental market can actually support those on really low incomes.

The Hon. JOHN GRAHAM: Secondly, from the Tenants' Union's point of view, you have called for the existing protections to continue past October. Are you hopeful that that will occur? Without going into too much detail, what discussions have you had? You think there is a need for that, but are you hopeful that will be the case?

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: I think that the Minister's office has made clear that they are monitoring the evidence that is coming forward and that they will make a decision. I think it is reasonable for them to say, "We're going to make a decision closer to October." We would hope for a confirmation, really, by early September so that people know where they are going to be living, frankly, in October. That is a reasonable approach: to look for the evidence and make a decision based on that. The problem, as I outlined, is that we do not necessarily have the evidence coming through the system in the way that we need.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: What are the things that you think we need to be measuring that we are not?

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: We are waiting at the moment for the bond exit survey to be released. We understand that it is very close to release. The bond exit survey was a voluntary trial. It started, actually, over summer. It was a proposal that we had put forward last year where as someone claims a bond, they are asked three questions determining why the tenancy has ended, who initiated the ending and then what the end rent was, which no-one knows at the moment. There is no dataset that tells us what has happened to the rent within a tenancy. That will tell us the reasons why tenancies were ending and that will give us a much better indication of is this rent arrears—is this people leaving because they have rent arrears, or is it a landlord evicting because they have rent arrears, which need slightly different responses. Are they being evicted using no-grounds eviction? It gives us the real data around this.

This trial that started over summer, which the Government extended through COVID—or at least through the first couple of months of COVID—was a voluntary opt-in survey, so it will not have complete coverage. We understand there are a significant number that will give us a good sample size, but it really does need to form part of the bond claim process that is just mandatory, very quick questions so that we have the complete visualisation. We currently have a release that tells us how long a tenancy ended and how much of the bond was claimed by the agent or returned to the tenant for every single bond. They are already collated. It is de-identified data—there is no privacy issue there—but it gives us a much better indication of what is happening. We need more of that. I think that the other transparency or understanding that we are missing is the landlords' position.

Do they own 20 properties? Do they own just one? What is the size of the mortgage? What is their usage? Do they swap between short-term rentals and residential tenancies? We see that a lot up and down the coast, for instance: A residential tenancy agreement runs from March to October and then it is short-term renting. That means that people have to move and it creates a very unstable environment for people. This kind of transparency around how the property industry actually works—we know more about real estate—

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Is any of that data provided by the Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS]?

Mr PATTERSON ROSS: Some of the tax statistics provide—we know what people are claiming on their tax as deductions and that can give an okay indication, but not really. Particularly for the short-term letting—the swap between—there would be no transparency through the Australian Taxation Office.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I have some system questions.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I have one more. In all fairness and for the purpose of transparency, Mr David Shoebridge has asked me to ask this. Ms McKernan, I think it relates to you. I think you indicated that you are now seeing an increase in the number of rough sleepers. I think that was what you said.

Ms McKERNAN: There are people who have moved from the hotels back to rough sleeping. That is right.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Are you able to say now, in terms of those who are essentially returning to rough sleeping, what services are now available for those people? It is a fairly radical change, from staying at Rydges or better to being back on the streets.

Ms McKERNAN: Yes. They are able to access the assertive outreach services that are around and they are continuing to be offered hotel and motel accommodation but it is no longer—it is being provided in the kind of closer to business-as-usual provision of hotel and motel accommodation that happened pre-pandemic. The

situation is that Together Home is coming into play. People are being rapidly housed into that program but there are more people in need of the program than there is housing available so we still have an issue where we are going to have and continue to have rough sleepers. One thing we have been looking at is other jurisdictions and how they have been coping with that. If you look at Victoria, for example—and obviously they are in a different situation at the moment with community transmission—they have extended the hotel stays for people sleeping rough until April next year.

One of the issues we are looking at at the moment is that we are looking at, if there is increased community transmission, is that we will have to stand up everything again. So there are conversations that we are having with the department about: How do we maintain this in a way so that we have planned for this and we are actually not having to up and down throughout the pandemic period but actually provide consistent support to people? What we have seen, for those who have accessed the hotel accommodation, is that they really thrived. Providing someone with a good quality hotel room and support means that people are really thriving in that environment. We are really hoping to provide as much housing and long-term support to people as possible because we would rather see them move into long-term housing and exiting homelessness forever and really thriving more broadly rather than, yes, ending up back on the street.

I would say too that people on the street are often people with more complex needs and who require that high level of support and that really intensive support as well. We need the resources there to be able to provide people with housing and that high level of support that they need so that we can work with them to, you know, end their homelessness.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: This is my final question. Is there any targeted testing for COVID in terms of rough sleepers?

Ms McKERNAN: Yes. The local health district has worked really closely with the housing and homelessness services to put testing in place and be available for people sleeping rough and people in the hotels as well. Yes, so absolutely there is a process for that.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Thank you all. I want to reiterate we are very appreciative of all the incredible work you have done in these difficult times and thank you for coming here today to help us with some better information. I was just interested in what Ms McKernan said about the lack of joined-up data. Am I correct that you mentioned in that? I am interested in whether you could expand on that and what has been the challenge, and what you propose might assist in that?

Ms McKERNAN: Yes.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: I think you talked about joining Health, Housing, homelessness and justice. Could you help the Committee out with some more information?

Ms McKERNAN: Yes. I mean, unfortunately this is an issue prior to the pandemic too in terms of silos around programs. What that meant, kind of as a practical example, is when working with people sleeping rough to get them into the hotels and motels, you rang Link2home and they used the housing programs for data recording. The homelessness services have a completely different data system that they use and then Health has their own system. So what we found in terms of working in a rapid way to provide accommodation to people was that the information then had to be either collected three times by different people—and there were gaps in transferring that information, say, from once a person was eligible for accommodation and moved into that accommodation—then there was a whole process that then had to happen again to make sure that the support providers had the right information around supports.

So it created a huge amount of work for everybody—department, Health and homelessness services—and it meant that people did fall through the gaps. It took time to get to people in terms of their support needs and understanding what was required. It took time in terms of food, making sure that people who were diabetic had the right food, et cetera, et cetera. So we really need to look at how we are—the thing that has been great in this period has been the collaboration. What we need is really assistance to really enable that collaboration, to enable that information, to be shared—obviously respecting privacy and confidentiality—but enabling that to work so that we can all work efficiently together.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Yes. Forgive me for not knowing the right terminology—I should. I think it was the homelessness audit?

Ms McKERNAN: The street count.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: The street count?

Ms McKERNAN: I am sorry, the survey—End Street Sleeping?

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Yes. Is that sort of your starting point? Is that where you work from, or what is your starting point?

Ms McKERNAN: That would certainly be useful. We did look at using that information at the beginning because that was done in November and there was over 300 people who were surveyed and we were hoping that that information would assist us. But, unfortunately, it did not really—again because the data was not actually matching with the clients, if that makes sense. Again, if we had a plan and a planned approach—I think we have an inner city task force that is looking at people sleeping rough. That has worked really effectively. It has included police, it has included Health, Housing and the sector. What we would really love to see is a plan going forward around: How do we make this work forever? How do we make sure our data is shared well? How do we trouble shoot and raise issues and work together well? I think that is a solution going forward.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: It might be a career-limiting move on my part to suggest it—others may wish to—but you almost need a Service NSW for this sector, right, so you deal with what works?

Ms McKERNAN: Yes. One of the things I was suggesting to the Minister at the beginning was having a broader statewide level task force that was looking at the issue and really developing a plan going forward we were not able to stand that up for a whole range of reasons.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Sure.

Ms McKERNAN: It was established in the inner city and it has really demonstrated what can be done collaboratively so we would be really keen to see something going forward.

The Hon. NATALIE WARD: Who is a part of that? Is that the three that you mentioned?

Ms McKERNAN: Yes.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Some last questions from me. The Government has announced indexation for your organisations and the organisations that you represent at about 1.75 per cent. Can you confirm that you have received that? Can you let me know where that is up to?

Ms QUILTY: I think it has come through, yes. We have all got our letters. It is only interim. It is just up until the budget and it only applies to wages, so it is not across the board.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is it going to cover the National Wage Case in terms of equal pay for community sector workers? Is it sufficient to cover that?

Ms QUILTY: The equal remuneration order [ERO] is a separate issue.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Has that been resolved?

Ms QUILTY: No. We are ongoing in terms of our advocacy on that issue and our keenness to resolve it.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Sorry, can you just explain to the Committee where that is up to?

Ms QUILTY: Yes. The equal remuneration order was a Fair Work Commission determination that came in 2012 in recognition of the fact that the work of the sector, which is largely feminised, had been undervalued. It brought in a series of payments over a period of about 10 years to achieve that equal pay. The legislation that has guaranteed those payments comes to an end next year or at the end of this year, so there will be one last payment that takes it through until next year. The intention was that those payments would then be ongoing. However, contracts that people are signing now do not make reference to ERO and we are unclear as to whether in fact it will be ongoing. We have received from the Department of Communities and Justice [DCJ] some assurances that, "Don't worry. Our intention is to continue to pay that and to roll what were supplementary payments into baseline funding", but we do not yet have contracts that reflect that.

We have seen in some other parts of the system where those payments are going to be rolled into baseline funding and that will be expressly dealt with in the contract. So we are suggesting to Government that a consistent approach and providing that contractual assuredness across the board would be a really positive thing.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes. I would have thought that after 10 years we would have managed to roll those in by now, but not yet. So you are saying not yet.

Ms QUILTY: Not yet.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Okay. The other question I wish to ask is addressed to Ms McKernan. For homelessness services you had a rollover of your contracts for a year. The year is almost up so are you now starting on a new round of contract negotiation?

Ms McKERNAN: Yes. We are yet to start that because of the focus that there has been on ongoing service delivery; but, yes, that is right. That is what will happen. I think the big learning over 2020 is that we are essential services. The impact of Going Home Staying Home in terms of providing disruption to the homelessness services system is well documented. I think at this point in time we really need to just understand that we are an essential part of the service system. Disruption at any point, but let alone right now, is going to be very, very problematic.

One of the things we have not mentioned much, but which we have been trying to also raise with the department in this context, is that a number of services will have issues with sustainability going forward due to the loss of philanthropic and charitable donations. Services use that funding to top up their service delivery and so we are quite concerned that we will see a loss of services within about nine months time due to their inability to go forward. We are really keen to do some work with the Government around how we manage that issue, particularly given we are so essential.

The ACTING CHAIR: I note that the time for this round of questions has expired. I thank the four witnesses for their time and for coming along today. I believe one question was taken on notice. The Committee has resolved that answers to questions on notice be returned within 21 days. The secretariat will contact you in relation to the questions taken on notice. Thank you again.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

RHIANNON COOK, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, St Vincent De Paul Society, affirmed and examined
NADA NASSER, State Director (NSW, ACT, Victoria), Mission Australia, affirmed and examined
TONY DEVLIN, Manager, Money Care, Salvation Army, sworn and examined

The ACTING CHAIR: I thank the second round of witnesses attending today. Would one or all of you like to give a brief opening statement of not more than two minutes?

Mr DEVLIN: Firstly, I acknowledge the traditional custodians, the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora nation, on whose land and water I live and work, and pay my respects to elders, past and present and emerging. I acknowledge their continuing relationship to this land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia. I thank the Committee, on behalf the Salvation Army, for the opportunity to present our evidence and share our experiences. Our vision is:

Wherever there is hardship or injustice, Salvos will live, love and fight alongside others to transform Australia one life at a time with the love of Jesus.

We have pursued this vision during the pandemic in a number of different ways. At the local level, we put together "we care" packages as a small gesture to remind our communities that we are there for them. We are working with government and other organisations, including Mission Australia and St Vincent De Paul Society, to respond to emerging needs. We have also adapted our services so that we can continue providing essential assistance to communities across Australia in a COVID-safe way. As early as mid-March, on the heels of the black summer bushfires, our strategic emergency and disaster management team was working with State governments, including the New South Wales Government, to support the delivery of essential supply packs to people who were self-isolating and did not have support to obtain daily necessities.

The Salvation Army operates a number of residential facilities for people experiencing homelessness. Almost 50 residents of our foster homes crisis accommodation in Surry Hills were moved into hotels to ensure that they had access to COVID-safe accommodation, thanks to funding from the New South Wales Government. Our existing collaborative relationships with Mission Australia, St Vincent De Paul Society and Wesley Mission, meant that we were able to quickly work out shared case management for these community members. As restrictions change in New South Wales, we need to ensure that everyone who is being supported through temporary accommodation has a pathway to permanent housing, and that they have access to the support they need to maintain that housing. The Salvation Army is also one of the largest providers of financial counselling and emergency relief in New South Wales and we provide no-interest loans.

We are bracing for the impact of the end of the debt deferral periods, the moratoriums on evictions, energy disconnections and the end of the higher level of government support. The "cliff" may not now happen, however we may have a very steep and very long slope. We are conscious that more support may be needed as a long-term effects of the pandemic emerge. We are grateful for the support that the New South Wales Government has provided to date, including the additional \$6 million in funding for asylum seekers and people on temporary visas to the sector. The important Energy Accounts Payments Assistance [EAPA] scheme must continue to meet the needs of people experiencing hardship. As a long-term provider of the scheme, we would greatly welcome opportunities for input and collaboration with the department and other stakeholders to ensure that the scheme meets needs appropriately.

Unfortunately, it appears that there will be a significant increase in people with severe financial hardship and unmanageable debt. We need to ensure that there will be sufficient financial counselling services to meet the expected demand in the months and years ahead. Financial counselling services have been shown to not only relieve financial hardship but also improve mental health and personal wellbeing. Our data in recent months indicate that our regional areas may be hardest hit. Our experience is that the promise of quick access to finance needed to get through the week can be very appealing to people in crisis. As people find themselves in more financial stress—perhaps more than ever in their life—we would urge them to seek help from free, community-based services like our Moneycare program, rather than turning to predatory short-term loans, which have a long-term detrimental effect.

We encourage the New South Wales Government to consider additional protections for people potentially impacted by predatory lenders, as well as further developing support for the no-interest loans program. We have a unique opportunity in a post-COVID Australia to make sure that everyone is visible and valued. We would like to see Australia advance, as the economy and society re-emerge, to a new normal state, which will be better prepared and more resilient to future shocks. Thank you for your time.

Ms NASSER: Thank you very much for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today. I too begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we meet on today, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to elders, past, present and future, and other Aboriginal people here today. Mission Australia is a non-denominational Christian organisation that delivers evidence-based, client-centred community services with a focus on ending homelessness, strengthening communities and ensuring vulnerable people in need can thrive. Last year Mission Australia supported about 65,000 people in New South Wales through 268 services. We collaborate with government and organisations such as Salvos and Vinnies and others in the sector. We have adapted very quickly under extraordinary circumstances to prepare and respond to this pandemic.

Our focus continues to be on supporting and keeping our vulnerable clients and staff safe; contributing to the community effort to stop the spread of the virus; and continuing to support vulnerable people, families and communities in need. We established a COVID-specific crisis management team and are continually revising our national emergency response and planning. Every one of our sites has developed a COVID-19 action plan, which is regularly revised to respond to changes in the level of infection risk and government direction. In our residential services, particularly our homelessness services, we have been working actively with the Department of Communities and Justice and other organisations to prepare our facilities and to support the broader effort of moving homeless people to safe accommodation.

We moved most of our non-residential programs to remote and distance service delivery, including phone contact and virtual service delivery. In relation to the Government's response, I would like to say that, by and large, we feel that the New South Wales Government has responded well to the pandemic and to addressing some of the immediate impacts on vulnerable people. For example, the collaboration between the Department of Communities and Justice and the sector around a homelessness response and the resources followed to support things like leasing and temporary accommodation is commendable; as are the additional resources provided to mental health, domestic and family violence and the practical assistance provided to our organisations and others to support additional cleaning technology and those sorts of practical areas of assistance as we move to remote service delivery.

There are areas that need more attention. One of these is outbreak management in residential facilities. Mission Australia operates three aged-care facilities for highly vulnerable homeless people, as well as a number of other residential facilities for homeless people, such as crisis and transitional accommodation, mental health services and rehabilitation programs. We have put in place strong infection control and other preventative outbreak management measures but these facilities are not funded nor resourced to operate like hospitals. We need clear protocols and commitment from NSW Health to hospitalise vulnerable older people and homeless people in residential and other facilities who test positive. Other concerns that we have are about the impact of the pandemic broadly on vulnerable people. We have seen increases in referrals to our family domestic violence services, emergency relief, employment programs and, more broadly, the deterioration of the mental health and wellbeing of some of our clients due to isolation.

We are also concerned about the long-term impact, which we are yet to fully understand, but we know that that will be felt for many years to come. We need a long-term recovery plan to make sure that people already experiencing disadvantage are not left behind. We need more social services and programs to address this impact, not less, as Government looks to cut programs to fund the cost of managing the pandemic. We also want to see an economic stimulus package that invests in social and affordable housing, ideally with a target of 5,000 new homes each year for the next 10 years. This will create much-needed jobs and reduce homelessness.

Ms COOK: I acknowledge that we are meeting on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and pay my respects to their Elders past, present and emerging. I also acknowledge that crises such as this pandemic tend to disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Even if we have so far managed to avoid the more immediate and potentially devastating health impacts we know that the social and economic consequences will be far-reaching, so we would hope that equity would be at the centre of all our recovery efforts.

I will start by telling the Committee a little bit about Vinnies in New South Wales. We provide services to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness and those experiencing problematic alcohol or other drug use. We support people with complex mental health diagnoses, behavioural support needs and people with disability. Each year our 4,000 member volunteers also provide assistance in the form of financial and material support and care and companionship to approximately 60,000 people in their communities across the State. While some of our services receive government grant funding—about 50 per cent—a large proportion of our work is funded by revenue raised through our retail outlets and fundraising efforts and is supported by, as I mentioned, our significant volunteer workforce. I will come back to that in a moment.

But firstly, as Ms Nasser said, I say that we have appreciated the New South Wales Government's focused response to people experiencing homelessness. That includes the accommodation of many of the people who access our services in hotels and the recent Together Home commitment that will allow these people to move into two-year head lease properties with relevant supports. But, like many other organisations, we think that significant investment in increasing the supply of social housing is needed to make sure that efforts to date translate into a long-term and significant reduction in homelessness.

Many of our service managers report that during the pandemic they have also really appreciated the collaborative and flexible approach that most funding bodies have taken. This in turn has meant that we have been better able to respond to the need that we are seeing in the community. Many of the steps that the Federal and New South Wales governments have taken to reduce the impact of the economic challenge on people at risk of hardship have also been appreciated. In particular, with the introduction of the coronavirus supplement we have seen a request in our support for material relief from people who would ordinarily access that service. Yet there are some significant gaps, particularly for people on temporary visas, including people seeking asylum and international students.

As an organisation we have taken a financial hit during the pandemic and a significant proportion of our volunteers have had to withdraw services. This has ongoing implications for the delivery of our services at a time when they are likely to be needed most. We know that unemployment is already high and rising. There will be an increase in financial and relationship stress and an escalation in mental health and domestic and family violence issues. Our services report that in recent weeks they are beginning to see increased presentations in need, including people who are walking through the doors who have never before experienced homelessness. We think the charity sector plays a vital role in the ongoing response to the pandemic and we hope the New South Wales Government will continue to acknowledge and to support that role.

The ACTING CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Cook. We might start with questions from the Opposition and the Hon. Penny Sharpe.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Thank you for what all your organisations have done. I have been familiar with quite a lot of work happening on the ground and there have been some miracles that have been pulled off in the last few months. I wanted to ask you about a couple of things. One is that a lot of your services also provide drug and alcohol services. One of the things raised with me as an emerging issue is the access to rehab beds for people exiting prison—there has been a general closure under COVID. Would any of you be able to comment on that? Perhaps Mr Devlin? I think the Salvos are closing its 70-bed rehab up at the Central Coast.

Mr DEVLIN: Look, I—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: If it is outside your area it is okay. I am not trying to be tricky. I am just interested.

Mr DEVLIN: I would have to take that on notice, I am sorry, and get some more detail about that. The data that we are all seeing, of course, is that there has been a particular increase in online gaming and in the purchase of alcohol during this time. That certainly is a concern. In terms of further detail about access to our facilities I would have to take that on notice.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Any general comments around drugs and alcohol and what you are seeing in terms of the clients and the services that you provide?

Ms COOK: Our residential service closed its books for the initial period in the pandemic in order to manage the risk. Since it has reopened our referrals have increased and they have been high and ongoing, so there is a significant waiting list for that service. It has been further complicated by border closures, which mean that people might not be able to access services that they otherwise could.

Ms NASSER: Likewise, we have also seen an increase in alcohol consumption. That has broader impacts across a range of areas. In terms of our alcohol and other drug facilities we have two youth facilities and there have always been long waiting lists for those facilities. Rehabilitation beds generally in New South Wales and, really, across Australia is a major issue and there are not sufficient detox and rehabilitation services.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I think the head leasing, two years' safe accommodation for some people would be very important. Of the support that you have received, how much of that funding has gone into temporary hotel arrangements versus the private head leasing arrangements?

Ms NASSER: I cannot give you specific figures. Initially the response focused very much on temporary accommodation and moving people into hotels and motels, both from the street and from some of the high-risk

residential facilities as well. More recently the Together Home program is providing funding for head leasing and support to move people into long-term housing. I am not sure proportionately where the mix of the funding is. I guess what we have been advocating for right from the start is that we wanted to move to the long-term leasing approach right from the beginning. In fact, in early April we advocated that to the Department of Communities and Justice, saying we need a housing-first approach. Hotels and motels are fine in emergency situations but we really needed to move to long-term housing, long-term leases with support as early as possible.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: You have had to do quite incredible work moving a lot of your counselling and other services online. How have you managed the issue with the digital divide? As you know, the fact that someone has got a phone does not mean they necessarily have enough money or credit in the phone. It does not mean they have access to the internet. They are trying to homeschool kids at home. It has been a very complicated scenario. Can you give the Committee an idea of how you have managed that, or make recommendations to Government about how we do better in that space?

Mr DEVLIN: I am happy to comment about that. Our emergency relief and financial counselling services had to move out of our offices to working from home situations. Some of that is moving back in now under COVID guidelines and requirements. No, it has been difficult. We have found videoconferencing very difficult, because most people we were working with did not have access to videoconferencing themselves. A lot of people of course still do not have reliable internet—or any internet—at home. The digital divide is well and truly there and it is a major concern. Most of our financial counselling and emergency relief conversations are happening by phone, which is not ideal. We know that we do some of our best work face to face, and that has been difficult.

Having conversations with people from home is difficult for them, too, because they have got lots of distractions in the background. It has also been very difficult for people from a non-English speaking background, particularly where—we have tried to use interpreters and that sort of thing. So, no. It has been very challenging. We are keen to get back into a face to face situation where we can. We are developing videoconferencing better as we speak and we are doing some things now we were not aware of in February, which is great. So, it has brought things on but it has been a challenge.

Ms COOK: I think we have found that there has been a mix of some really positive things that have come about because of technology and also some real concerns. So, some of the positive things are just that some service provision is easier and there is less time wasted. And also, we have been able to reach people for whom geography would have been a barrier and allocate resources more flexibly to needs. So, where one area is full we can allocate a staff member from another area—and also providing continuity of care to people who might move out of the area. That has been a real bonus but there have also been challenges.

For some people it is the physical access to the equipment that is the issue and that is a really hard problem to overcome. Down at Matthew Talbot we have got some iPads that people can come in from the community to access so they can access some of our programs remotely on site. But also, the other thing is just the level of upskilling both of staff—that has been really significant—but then, them coaching clients through technology remotely when that is not their area of expertise. That has been a really significant resource drain.

Ms NASSER: Like my colleagues, we have also seen both challenges and positives in moving to remote delivery. One of the big issues for us has been security of information and using the right platforms to ensure that privacy and security is our biggest priority. So, that has meant working really quickly to identify the technology platforms that gave us the best possible secure system. Also, supporting our clients with phones and iPads where that was needed—and also looking at really creative ways of providing services. For example, for some young people that needed that face to face interaction we worked with them in a park, for example, with social distancing. So, our staff were really creative at complying with the social distancing but at the same time making sure that our clients continued to get the services they needed.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Can I just ask one follow-up on that? Obviously it has been a really difficult time and people are seeking different types of financial support than they might usually be. During the remote schooling period, did you have people approaching you for that support for that, to engage that digital divide? Did you have anyone coming to you seeking support either for themselves or for their families?

Mr DEVLIN: For internet and phone expenses?

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That is right.

Mr DEVLIN: Look, it has more been for food and for rent and for general living expenses, rather than specifically. But quite often if we could help out with whatever it might be—food—then it allows extra money to pay for other things, which could include internet expenses and so on.

Ms NASSER: Look, access to technology for children homeschooling was a really big issue, keeping in mind that parents who were also working from home are using the computer. There may be only one computer in the household. So, it was a real issue and we did have families approaching us for assistance around access to technology.

Ms COOK: I know at least one of our services did form a partnership with schools in the area to try and address some of those issues. I do not have the details but I would be happy to provide those later.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That would be great. Thank you very much.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I wanted to ask you about your volunteers. If your volunteers are similar to most volunteers across the State a lot of them would have been in the older category, which meant that the issues of isolation were significant. But I also know that some services have actually managed to recruit new volunteers through the lockdown period. I am interested in how you are managing the volunteer—given you rely so heavily on them, what has worked well and what are the challenges into the future? As I said, a lot of your volunteers, I am assuming, have to actually stay away from people rather than being close to people.

Ms COOK: The average age of our volunteers is over 70. They are in the age group where they are vulnerable themselves. That has been a really significant part of our workforce that has had to step away from their duties. A lot of them have continued to provide support to people over the phone—so, just regular welfare checks over the phone. We have done some work to pair some of our older volunteer groups with younger volunteers who can do the delivery of the physical goods. Yes, we have managed to recruit some new volunteers, but overall there has been a significant reduction in our volunteer workforce. That has impacted both our service delivery but also our retail outlets.

Mr DEVLIN: We have about 30,000 regular volunteers nationally. A big impact for us, of course, was our Red Shield Appeal, which normally takes place in May. Well, it did take place in May, but of course there was no door knock associated with it this year. So, there was quite a financial impact for the Salvation Army because of that. In our financial hardship and housing areas there is less and less volunteers these days because of professional and other requirements. So, for our financial counselling and emergency relief services we were able to continue on without any material impact. About four years ago we set up effectively a call centre for emergency relief operating out of Auburn, which provides five days a week, business hours access for people. It is staffed by employed people. So, that was able to continue on where some of our local centres' volunteers were not able to continue on. They could call that number and get access to assistance that way.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: My understanding is that the New South Wales Government established a volunteer recruitment app during that. Have any of your services used that?

Ms COOK: Not that I am aware of.

Mr DEVLIN: No.

Ms NASSER: I am not aware of that.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Can I ask you about the new people that you are seeing coming through the doors? Everyone has reflected that there are people who are seeking assistance who have never sought assistance before. Our previous people who gave evidence this morning talked about single mums who have been in shared living arrangements. Are you just able to tell us a little bit about the different types of people who are coming through the doors and whether there are particular issues you think need to be addressed that is different to the way you would normally provide support?

Mr DEVLIN: Look, we have done some research for our financial counselling and capability service—in particular, the people who are actually coming through the door at this stage over April, May and June. We have found COVID-19 clients are more likely to be young, in the 16 to 24 age group. That has gone from 6 per cent of our client base to 10 per cent of our client base. They are more likely to live in a couple-based household or other type of household, which includes non-related household members, like share accommodation.

They are more likely to be born overseas, not to speak English and to be an asylum seeker, refugee or temporary visa holder, and less likely to live in public housing, as compared to our traditional clients. So, asylum seekers and refugees using our financial counselling related services has gone from 2 per cent to 4 per cent. So, that has doubled, and temporary visa holders has gone from 2 per cent to 6 per cent. For our emergency relief

services it is a little bit more anecdotal at this stage. But there was a week there, I was advised, that 70 per cent of the people accessing the service had not used the emergency relief service before—since at least five years.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Just to be clear, your emergency service—that is food. Is that food?

Mr DEVLIN: Assistance with food and rent and things like that, yes. So, 70 per cent were not regular, if you like—unusual, different clients. It is quite clear there is a different cohort accessing our services now that there has been before.

Ms COOK: We have seen an increase in people on temporary visas and that is people seeking asylum, international students, but also some people who are here on tourist visas [inaudible]. And then, the other group of people who do not see themselves as being people that would normally rely on charity—so, they have never had to reach out for assistance before. There was a gap at the beginning of the pandemic when people started to lose their jobs and before Government assistance kicked in. And so, we were the stopgap for some people during that time. But I think we are quite concerned that those people will have to start coming back in through our doors soon, as any savings are used up and because many of them have high fixed costs. We are also concerned about overcoming that shame or stigma that prevents some people from reaching out for assistance from charities, and what happens when the coronavirus supplement decreases and when the asset test is reintroduced.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Worrying times ahead. Ms Nasser?

Ms NASSER: Yes, likewise. As I said earlier, we have seen an increase in demand for our services, from domestic family violence, emergency relief and employment. In terms of the profile of people who are coming through our services, we are seeing young people, for example, coming to our youth employment programs who are for the first time experiencing unemployment, and a slightly different cohort to what we would have seen before—people who may have had a history of employment and for the first time are finding themselves unemployed. Likewise, too, with temporary visa holders and overseas students—we are also seeing an increase for support from that cohort as well.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: You probably cannot answer this but in terms of the overseas students, I am interested in the demographic of that group. Also, how many of them are left? Has there been an attempt to hang on here, or have the majority of them headed back to their homes overseas?

Mr DEVLIN: I do not have numbers around that. You hear anecdotally that previously they could support themselves at some level through the gig economy—through home deliveries and all that sort of stuff. That has pretty much gone now or decreased to such an extent where they are now needing to access our services. Unfortunately, I cannot really add much more to that.

Ms NASSER: I do not know. I am not sure in terms of the broader numbers and how many are left. I really do not have that information. We do know that that is a vulnerable group of people in our community who are seeking support from our services.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I accept that. In terms of the services that they are seeking, is it principally in the form of food and rental assistance? Is that a very basic need that they have in terms of getting by?

Ms COOK: That is the kind of assistance that we have been providing.

Ms NASSER: Yes.

Mr DEVLIN: Those sort of folk are also coming to our financial counselling services as part of that temporary visa holder group but, I think, at a lower level. I think it is more emergency relief—food and assistance.

Ms NASSER: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Thanks very much for your time today and for your very valuable testimony. I wanted to ask you specifically about food insecurity. I understand that you give a broad range of support. Mr Devlin, I think you said sometimes people are seeking support for different sources because they are redirecting their funds to do other things. I say this knowing that Vinnies, in particular, gave us some really useful insights when we had an inquiry previously into food insecurity. That was obviously before the pandemic and before the current economic crisis that has followed. I am interested to get a sense of what you see the rates of food insecurity are doing at the moment.

Ms COOK: I think there has probably been a real shift in the people for whom food security is an issue. Normally a lot of the people who reach out to us for assistance with food are people who are on NewStart or, now, JobSeeker, and that was just because income did not cover all of their basic expenses. There has been a reduction from that cohort presenting to us over the past few months. But then there has been, particularly earlier in the

pandemic, people who just did not have access to food—so people who had to self-isolate and did not have family or friends that they could call on—and then that increase in international students. There has also been a real shift in the availability of food security.

Vinnies has had to close some of our vans and I know in the community other food pantry type services have closed, and so some of our homelessness services have now started to be more active in that space. There have been a whole lot of volunteer organisations spring up and do some really informal food relief as well. I think measuring at a population level would be really challenging because of that enormous level of informal support that is going on.

Ms NASSER: I guess our concern around food security is the cliff when income support reduces—when JobKeeper ends and JobSeeker reduces. We are not feeling that at the moment, to a large extent. Certainly food security we are experiencing in terms of access to food. There has been an increase in charities providing social meals, including Mission Australia, where we provide social meals because people are in isolation and cannot access the food. So there is that aspect of it, as well as the panic around buying and supply. In the early stages in particular, when there were shortages of different aspects of food, we did see families being concerned about running out of food and not being able to access a supply of food.

Mr DEVLIN: Yes, I certainly agree. There is a big difference, I think, between what is happening right now—because we do have government supports right now. We do have a lot of deferrals of payments of all sorts: of finance payments, of rent, of energy payments. When that changes, that is the big concern. The debt levels—there is something like over \$266 billion in debt deferred at the moment—massive amounts of money. A lot of that is still accruing interest. When all that changes, which I guess it will, it is really important that all those organisations reach out to their customers to work with them to get in place long-term flexible arrangements. But when that changes, I think that is when there will be further pressure on our services for direct things like food.

I think what is coming through our emergency relief services at the moment, apart from food and rent and utilities, is motor vehicle costs. For the people who are still driving, keeping their car on the road is important. Tolling is a part of that as well and is an additional thing that we are seeing through our emergency relief that we were not seeing, particularly, before as well.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You mentioned that some of your retail outlets had closed, Ms Cook.

Ms COOK: Yes.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Obviously, it is a very different environment that we are operating in in this "learning to live with COVID" world. What are some of the requirements that have been placed on you and the services that you are providing to continue to operate to provide support? Is that a really big burden that you are having to shoulder? Can you explain to us, even anecdotally, how you are working through those issues?

Mr DEVLIN: It has been a big thing, I am sure, for everyone. To move to a working-from-home situation was a big thing that we all had to do very quickly. I think all our team members responded incredibly well. That has been particularly difficult, of course, for people with young families in particular and for people who are living by themselves. We had to supply some additional equipment to people. Largely, it was pretty good. Most people had laptops and phones but we had to supply equipment to some people. Just like people in the community, our team members are exactly the same: They are living in one-bedroom apartments with two kids and it is busy and difficult to work that way.

In some areas we are moving back into the office again and, of course, there are the requirements around that for shields and distancing. Some of our rooms were found not to be of sufficient space, so that has been difficult. Traditionally our rooms have not always been big enough. But our services and people have been responding really well and just getting on with it, but obviously looking to protect the welfare of our workers, which is critically important. I guess, so far so good.

Ms NASSER: From a funding requirements perspective, we have seen quite a bit of flexibility from funding bodies who were prepared to provide some flexibility around the key performance indicators, particularly where there are particular programs that we are funded to deliver and we are no longer able to deliver because of the social distancing, such as community programs or group work or programs that we would run in schools—those sorts of things. So there has been quite a bit of flexibility to review those programs and the approach to them. In some cases we needed to stop those programs and redirect our resources to delivering one on one virtually. So there has been quite a bit of that flexibility from government agencies.

I have to say initially there was quite a bit of confusion. There was a little bit of confusion initially, should we be closing our site, not closing our site, but I think that was understandable. We were all operating in an initial state of uncertainty about where this was heading. I think that has settled down quite a bit.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Nasser, you said you run some programs in schools. What kinds of programs are they that you had to cease?

Ms NASSER: We do quite a bit of work with schools through family mental health support services, through our targeted early intervention programs where we might go in and do some programs with primary school kids or with high school kids. Some of that is early intervention, mental health support, peer support, a range of programs. Some of that is one on one, some of that is through group work. Clearly when schools open, even when schools reopened it was difficult to do that because the demand on schools at that time was not the right time for us to be going in there and doing programs. One of the key things we do with schools is our youth survey, which we do annually. Schools normally participate and this is where young people through schools conduct that survey. This year it has been a real challenge because of the close and open, and the pandemic has created some difficulties there.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Are you still able to run your breakfast programs in schools?

Ms NASSER: I will have to take that on notice to find out exactly where they are at. Clearly when the schools are closed, not, but even when schools reopened there were more limitations around going back in there to do some of those programs. I can take that specific question on notice in terms of breakfast programs.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: That would be great, thank you. I know initially when schools first reopened and now there has been a slight easing of allowing people on the grounds, whether it was allowed during the first tranche or during the second tranche, that would be quite helpful. I am sorry, Ms Cook, I cut you off.

Ms COOK: No, that is fine. I think one of the areas of concern is where our services have had to reduce capacity in order to be safe. Being safe for staff and the people who access our services is of utmost importance. If this eruption of social issues that we are expecting happens, and we know that many parts of the service of the community sector were already under-resourced, and now there is reduced capacity on top of that, there will be a bigger mismatch between the capacity of services and the level of need in the community.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Retail outlets are starting to reopen, how is operating in a COVID-safe environment impacting on them?

Ms COOK: I do not have a lot of detail on that. I know many of the stores are operating at reduced hours. That is a bit of a staffing issue and volunteering issue, but I can get more detail on the COVID-safe practices that are in place in all of the stores.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: You are very big organisations operating across the country, is there anything that we could be doing better that other States are doing, support that the Government is providing that we could be doing here, or lessons that we could be learning that you have heard anecdotally from perhaps some of your colleagues in other States?

Mr DEVLIN: That is a big question, and I am sure there are lots of things. It has been such a changing time. We have all learned smaller and bigger things during this time. The Western Australia Government, for example, recently provided a package of funding for financial counselling services within the State at a substantial value. There is a really good financial counselling program in New South Wales, but there is concern will that be big enough to meet future demand. That is a big concern. It is not just going to be next month, it is going to be for the next number of years, whatever that is. Prior to COVID happening we were not meeting the demand then. It is concerning what the future holds for that. Also in the no interest loans area, again the New South Wales Government provides some funding in that area, unlike some other States, which is terrific.

But as we move away from government supports the likelihood of predatory lenders coming more and more to the fore, as they have in the past, they are increasing rapidly, there is concern about that. To have a strong no interest loans program is really important to provide a safe alternative to predatory type debt.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Can I just interrupt there, Mr Devlin. This is the problem when you are confronted with a question: What are other States doing better than what we are doing? And vice versa. You can pick out individual items that some States do, but those other States may not provide programs that are provided in New South Wales. I am not being critical of anyone, but this is the whole problem in just cherrypicking different

parts out of it. I think all the States have done their best to try to do it, irrespective of the political makeup of those States. Everyone is working out what they are doing as they go along really, are they not?

Mr DEVLIN: I think so, right now in particular. I guess my thought is to plan for the future. Planning for the future is so important. As I say, things are travelling, in the circumstances, reasonably well, but as things are changing now, in September-October, that is the big concern and what it is going to look like into the future.

Ms NASSER: Just to add to that, I think when this pandemic first started there was a view by all of us that a few months and it will all be over. We are now realising that we are really in this at least for another 12 months, if not longer. I think we now need to move to a stage where we are looking at that longer term, or the medium term planning in terms of the preparedness and the response phase, as well as longer term in terms of the recovery phase. We really need to be looking at more of a medium-term plan over the next 12 months. For example, we have had support from the Department of Communities and Justice around additional funding for cleaning, for personal protective equipment, things like that.

What we need is, okay, what does that look like over the next 12 months, and potentially more of a whole-of-government approach around this so that we are not dealing with a small amount of funding from Health, a small amount of funding from DCJ, and all of that has an administrative burden on organisations. Potentially over the next 12 months, can we look at a New South Wales Government support package recognising that we are going to be in this for the next 12 months at a minimum in terms of supporting organisations like ours but other organisations as well, particularly smaller organisations in preparing and responding to the pandemic?

I think the other area is, as I mentioned in my opening statement, we do need clearer protocols around residential services in outbreak management. At the moment we have really good guidelines, and the Department of Health and DCJ and the sector have been working closely together around homelessness services and providing guidelines for those services. But what we really need is clearer protocols. I know the South Australia Government has provided very clear commitments around hospitalising people who are high risk who are positive in aged-care facilities. What we are saying is in relation to homelessness facilities, particularly where there are shared services, as well as in aged-care facilities that are higher risk, we need really clear protocol around hospitalising people very early on, because the evidence is showing that if that happens very early on, that can help reduce the spread, but also can prepare those organisations to better respond and manage a surge workforce and get ready to deal with the outbreak.

Ms COOK: There are two things I would like to highlight. One is investment in social housing. The lack of access to affordable and appropriate housing is one of the biggest blockers for many parts of the service system and when I talk to service managers about good outcomes for the people they assist, often it is housing that is the insurmountable barrier. I think the New South Wales Government has the opportunity to lead the way there. We have seen that with the response to people experiencing homelessness, but this is an opportunity—that is a demonstration of what can be done when there is will and commitment and resources to back it up. So let us translate that into a long-term win.

The other area is support for people on temporary visas. That is really a Federal Government responsibility, but in the absence of any support coming from the Federal Government, the New South Wales Government has made a financial contribution. But, particularly for people seeking asylum, returning to their home country is not an option and they need to live.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I am just interested in your observation about very clear guidelines. Let me just give an example. I am in my sixties now so when we are talking about my parents, we are talking pretty old. My mother, at 93, would be offended at that, I think. I have one parent who is 93 and is fit, active although run over and high functioning mentally. I had a father who was very severely incapacitated—I emphasise "very severely"—because of a stroke in terms of both physical and mental capacity as a result. He has now passed away. I have another relative with now quite severe dementia.

I am interested in inviting your comment with regards to clear protocols as to what you should do with those three people. My mother is not in a nursing home: She is self-sustaining at home. It seems to me that you can talk about clear protocols but actually what you do with those three people may be quite different because of the circumstances in which they find themselves. The person who has severe dementia, for instance, may be quite troublesome in terms of moving into a hospital environment. My father, who had severe physical illness, we would not have moved and the family would have grossly disagreed with removing him from the nursing home. In a sense I am inviting you to comment on this: Is your clear protocol actually realistic when you look at the diversity of people who find themselves in institutionalised care?

Ms NASSER: Of course, a client-centred response is fundamental that you need to consider the exact circumstances, you need to consider the needs of the individual but you also need to balance that with the broader safety of the community and the safety of other residents and staff within that facility. That is complex. We recognise that that is complex. But I guess what we need are clear protocols so that we do not get to a point where there is an outbreak and we are still trying to argue or work out: Is hospitalisation a good thing or not a good thing? As we have seen, and we have seen this in other examples, I know that in one of the earlier outbreaks at the Dorothy Henderson Lodge one of the key success factors in management of that outbreak was early hospitalisation and that Health, the facility and the Commonwealth worked very closely together to move to an early hospitalisation as early as possible. That was a real success factor in the management of the outbreak in that facility.

So I guess what we need is a really clear protocol, not just guidelines, but some clear protocols that really outline that, yes, there is a principle commitment to hospitalisation early, of course recognising that you need to assess the circumstances of individuals and the needs of those individuals. You need to assess their choices. You need to also assess the impact on the broader facility as well. So it is a complex case and of course we do need to consider all the various aspects of it. But, yes, it is more about making sure that hospitalisation is an early solution because there is evidence that it does work at preventing the outbreak getting out of control.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: My last question is actually about the Energy Accounts Payment Assistance program. I hope you did not cover it while I was not in the room. I apologise: I had to step out. The EAPA program is very important around people meeting particularly their winter's heating, electricity bills and incoming costs. Do you have any suggestions for the Committee about the current administration of that program or what you expect to be the rising need in coming months about this?

Mr DEVLIN: There are some concerns about the program. It seems to have changed in recent times. I think just before the COVID crisis hit there were some changes in the administration of the program, which seems to have tightened up some of the areas. We are very keen to sit down with the Government and other service providers to work through that because there does seem to be some—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I mean, I am aware that some service providers are actually withdrawing from the program because they found it too hard to administer.

Ms COOK: And Vinnies is one of those service providers.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: We have seen such good flexibility and working with people's needs. This seems to be going in an opposite direction. Are you able to tell the Committee about the difficulties that Vinnies have had?

Ms COOK: I should say firstly, I guess, that the main reason for us having to withdraw from the program is that we delivered it almost entirely through our member volunteers who are older, as I said before, and for whom technology is a real challenge. For them being able to take up this new phone assessment process meant that a lot of people just thought that they could not continue to deliver the program, which meant that we were relying much more heavily on our staff at a time when our resources were already stretched. Capacity is probably the biggest thing but that coincided with, I guess, a more onerous assessment process and more administrative demands on our organisation. Not to say that there was not perhaps the need for more oversight of the EAPA program, but those two things coinciding at the same time just meant for us we made the decision to withdraw for this financial year. But, you know, there is still the potential that we will participate again in the future.

Mr DEVLIN: It is a really good program. It is better than many other States have, but it seems like it needs a little bit of further consideration at the moment. We know that those winter bills are coming in. With people working from home there is going to be some shocks around those bills, so it would be great to have a good conversation about that to get those issues sorted out.

The ACTING CHAIR: The time for questions having now elapsed, I think our three witnesses for attending. The Committee has resolved that answers to questions taken on notice be returned within 21 days. The secretariat will contact you in relation to the questions you have taken on notice. Questions will resume in the next round at 11.45 a.m.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

FRANCES RUSH, Chief Executive Officer, Asylum Seekers Centre, sworn and examined

MIRIAM PELLICANO, Executive Manager, House of Welcome, St Francis Social Services, affirmed and examined

PETER HENNESSY, Company Secretary, St Francis Social Services, sworn and examined

ROSANNA BARBERO, Chief Executive Officer, Addison Road Community Centre, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome to the afternoon session of the Public Accountability Committee Inquiry into the NSW Government's Management of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Between the commencement of this hearing and now, I am glad to say that I have received a negative for my COVID-19 test. I thank the Hon. Adam Searle for chairing the Committee this morning. I welcome all four witnesses this afternoon and thank you for the collective work you and your organisations do for some of the most vulnerable people, not just in this pandemic but on a full-time basis. If I can ask each of you, if you wish, to give a brief opening statement of no more than two minutes and then we will proceed to questioning. Ms Rush, I understand you have to leave at 12.30 p.m. and we will try to accommodate that.

Ms RUSH: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Who would like to start?

Ms RUSH: I am happy to start. I acknowledge that the Gadigal people are the traditional custodians of the land that we are meeting on, as is our centre at Newtown, and to pay respects to elders past, present and emerging. The Asylum Seekers Centre has been going for 27 years and this year alone we have supported just under 5,000 people. When the COVID pandemic hit, we had to move to offering most of our services remotely, which we did. We kept our primary health clinic going by appointment, particularly for people without access to Medicare. We continued with that so that people could have access to medicine. We have worked with colleagues here very closely to provide as much support as we can. We are providing 1,100 people a fortnight with a fortnights' amount of groceries to their home to enable them to stop travelling.

We used to provide all services under one roof—casework, employment, accommodation, crisis support and financial assistance—but, since the pandemic, we have changed our model so that we can be on the road to deliver to as many people as we can. What we are seeing are probably four areas that are of concern, I am sure, to all of us. We are seeing the real impact of financial assistance—or the lack of it. All of you would be aware that people seeking asylum, being on temporary visas, do not have access to JobSeeker, let alone JobKeeper. Many people whom we have supported have three or four part-time jobs, have become independent, paid tax and lost them overnight. With the COVID pandemic we set up a hotline. Our numbers tripled and it was around—"I can't pay my rent, I don't have any food and I have to move. Can you help me?" That is the response that we have been doing.

With the lack of financial assistance, it is the real impact where you basically do not know where your next meal is coming from or where you are going to stay. What we have seen is that we have been on the road delivering to people across Sydney—that south-west, north-west corridor. What has been really shocking to us is, where we have seen two families sharing—which is not unusual—we are now seeing three or four families sharing. We had seven individuals and there are 12 there that we are delivering to. People say to us, "We do not feel safe living like this." A really big issue in New South Wales is the fact that you have people who are suffering from lack of security—that is financial, a job and where the next job will come from—so you really have very few options for people. That is severely impacting people's mental health.

We also seeing the reality of what is going to happen to them. Even if people wanted to go home, they cannot. The request by the Prime Minister to go home is kind of offensive to people seeking asylum, when you know what they have fled and the circumstances that they are in. What we are looking at is in Housing NSW, people are not eligible for homeless services. So you have those doors shutting, you have people overcrowding and you have a very compromised situation. We have concern on that level alone. A sense of that impact—we looked at the number of people we are supporting in January and 16 per cent said they had financial stress. We did the same inquiry in July and it is now 60 per cent. Nearly everyone who had work has lost their work and is without any access to a safety net.

We have had strong support from the Department of Education and Ministry of Health NSW. Our two nurses—that is the only Government funding we get—are from Ministry of Health NSW. Our doctors give their time for free but we have been supported in that way. We are looking at the research that the Refugee Council

of Australia has done that was commissioned earlier this year. Monash University's John van Kooy was the author of the report. Just to be really practical in New South Wales, what you are looking at is around 750 people becoming homeless in the Cumberland area alone. With the moratorium ending, people are already in arrears. They have got very little to negotiate with the landlord when they have no income or no source of income coming in the future. We are very concerned about that tipping into homelessness—and yet the lack of access to homeless services provided by the State—and the degree of hidden poverty. Most people who hear about the issue are quite shocked that the number of people—and when you look at those in New South Wales you are looking at about 40,000 seeking asylum living in our community. People are not aware of that, but when you look at that destitution that causes a great distress.

I conclude by saying that the current situation is not sustainable. The New South Wales Government has provided some money for emergency relief, and that will do what it says: emergency relief. What people need is to be included in a regular income from a Centrelink payment throughout the pandemic. That used to happen up until March 2018, so it is not a new concept. But that will be the sustainable difference. We are worried that people are losing their rentals. They will not have a new opportunity to come into the market with a rental debt and no way to pay an ongoing rental. That is of concern. We would look at requesting, if there can be, representation from State to Federal, and also to look at a review and a really creative roundtable approach to how we can address the homeless services for people on temporary visas now.

Mr HENNESSY: St Francis Social Services runs two services. One is in Paddington, called Centre 360. Our clients are 12-year-old to 20-year-old young people and their families. We have been there for 42 years. We also have a service called the House of Welcome, which is located at Granville, and we have managed that service for about 10 years. It provides services to refugees and asylum seekers. Ms Pellicano is going to focus on the House of Welcome today, but let me just say that we have had a significant increase in demand for our services, both for counselling services in Paddington and for our refugees and asylum seekers out at the House of Welcome. It has increased dramatically in the last six months. I will leave it to Ms Pellicano to go through some of the details of that.

Ms PELLICANO: Thank you very much. I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. Thank you for the opportunity to attend Parliament today to discuss some of the challenges that we are facing as a community and as not-for-profits. Before the pandemic we were working with around 3,000 people to provide a range of services, including housing programs. We have a housing program that is currently accommodating around 90 people per night. We are one of the largest transitional housing providers for people seeking asylum in New South Wales and our service is quite unique, because we are accommodating people who have no incomes and no additional pathways to secure ongoing accommodation in the community. These programs are mainly run by community donations and some grants.

This program has been going on during the pandemic. What we are noticing at the moment is an increased referral to this service for women who are leaving domestic violence situations. We currently have three women who we would consider "at-risk" with young children in our housing, four women with young families who have fled domestic violence, and we do have a share accommodation property as well with four women who have also been referred to us from domestic violence services. During this pandemic we are seeing the increase in women at risk and there are very few pathways, I think, to be able to access long-term and safe, stable, secure accommodation for these women and their young families.

We are also providing ongoing casework support. Like the Asylum Seeker Centre, we have had to pivot our service to try to provide these services online and over the phone. We are delivering food, financial security and emergency relief support. At the beginning of the pandemic our phone lines were also inundated with calls and we had an increase of about 277 per cent in calls with people seeking assistance for, mainly, rental arrears, crisis accommodation, food insecurity and then for other reasons as well. But they are the main areas of focus, and about 82 per cent of our calls were to respond to assistance in these areas. People ringing us are desperate. The phone calls are filled with grown men crying, people who cannot feed their families, people who are on the brink of evictions. The amount of money that is owing in rental arrears for families is really quite extraordinary. People seeking asylum were already in crisis prior to the COVID pandemic.

With the shrinking of the Federal Government Status Resolution Support Services program, thousands of people were exited from any kind of financial safety net, which has just really exacerbated the conditions for people now across this COVID pandemic. We know that people seeking asylum in the community are facing heightened financial vulnerability. They work in highly precarious service-oriented sectors, and we have seen huge job losses in this group. Despite this, they remain ineligible for any substantive government support—JobSeeker and JobKeeper—and some are without access to Medicare. During this period alone referrals for our

food bank service increased 296 per cent, with our capacity to increase delivery of around 155 per cent, so we know there is a lot of unmet need in our community.

As Ms Rush mentioned, the Refugee Council of Australia released a report, and in the Cumberland local government area in which we are located it is estimated an additional 2,587 refugees and asylum seekers on temporary visas will lose their jobs and an additional 767 will become homeless. The risk of forced evictions at the end of the six-month moratorium is of grave concern to our agencies. We are already in a position where we cannot accommodate people with rental arrears who are at risk of homelessness or who turn up at our doorstep homeless. Without access to adequate housing and the ability for people to self-isolate in the face of an outbreak we risk potential increases in community-transmitted cases of COVID-19.

We also acknowledge and express our appreciation of funding from the New South Wales Government to provide emergency support to multicultural communities, including people seeking asylum and refugees. However, an emergency response will not be enough to cover the thousands of people who will remain in a desperate situation and in need for many months to come, nor meet the challenge beyond this short-term funding. We are looking for longer, more durable solutions so that we can prevent destitution in this community.

Ms BARBERO: I also acknowledge that we are meeting today on the land of the Gadigal people and Eora nation. I echo what Ms Rush and Ms Pellicano have said, so I will try to keep my statement a little bit briefer. Thank you for the opportunity to be present here today. I start by saying that access to food is basic human right and vital for health and for life. The COVID-19 pandemic has necessitated urgent and well-thought-out food action. Six years ago the Addison Road Community Organisation [ARCO], having researched and reported on food insecurity, opened its first original food pantry with funding from the NSW Environment Protection Authority [EPA].

ARCO is an organisation with capacity to reach the most vulnerable in times of crisis. We are a community-embedded NGO with the capacity to swing into action because we know our community. We have contact with over 300,000 and 200 organisations annually. We have already established local and other food supply networks. We have 66 food donors and our food pantry has an existing infrastructure, public access, vans, warehousing, refrigeration and parking. Our COVID-19 response started in mid-March. Virtually in 24 hours we ramped up our food pantry operations and converted our 1,000-square-metre hall into an emergency food preparedness and distribution centre. For five months we have been providing culturally appropriate healthy food including fresh fruit and vegetables, so important for supporting immunity and mental health, to people who have fallen through our society's safety nets.

We work with international students; refugees; asylum seekers; migrant workers; culturally and linguistically diverse [CALD] seniors isolated from their families and communities; the LGBTIQI communities; single-parent households; arts, culture and gig economy workers; indigenous families; and survivors of domestic and family violence. We work with 60 other organisations that order, collect and deliver our hampers to their communities. Between our food pantry and our food relief hub we are feeding up to 4,000 people a week, and at the beginning of the pandemic it was up to 10,000 people. We have added social, cultural and legal support services as the needs arise amongst the different groups that we work with.

Some of the challenges that we have faced are that our resources went into fundraising in order to purchase food. To date during the pandemic we have spent \$93,000 purchasing food from Foodbank, and that is at a great expense. We have also had to adapt all of our operations and site to be COVID safe. In our opinion, despite ARCO's established community assets and services there is disappointment about the Government's seeming lack of recognition and value afforded to a locally designed and built community organisation, and disappointment in terms of the State and Federal governments' lack of emergency funding commitment. Funding needs to be based on a robust understanding of the efficacy and capacity of organisations that deliver, not just those with a high profile.

The issues that we are seeing are that we cannot afford to ignore the welfare of our temporary visa holders. Low-wage migrant workers should be provided with the same protections and supports offered to citizens. I know from our work at Addi Road's COVID food relief work that temporary visa holders do not have support from families at home and are struggling to eat and pay rent. People are moving into more crowded housing, and this is how the virus spreads and affects the entire community. We saw this happen in Singapore. Recently we have also seen a lot more reports of suicide amongst the communities.

We believe that the \$4 million funding for temporary visa holders that was distributed by Multicultural NSW to specialist, migrant and service organisations is not enough to deal with the growing humanitarian crisis. People need money weekly to pay for food, rent and their accommodation and to stay home when they are sick.

Our recommendation for action is that the New South Wales Government should create a fund and lead a body to coordinate approaches to food security, research and emergency distribution. We need a whole-of-government approach. For example, the EPA has prepared organisations across New South Wales for food rescue. That infrastructure, with extra support, could be used to deliver food relief and it has not been.

The CHAIR: Again, I thank you all for coming today and the work you do in the community. Ms Barbero, I have been to Addison Road and have seen the extraordinary work you do. I think all members are aware of the work that the other organisations do. I will hand over to the Opposition for an opening round of questions.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Where to start? I just wanted to clarify, because I am not sure that people are aware: What housing support have temporary visa holders and refugees been able to access during this crisis? The money that has flowed for temporary hotel accommodation and some head leading: has any of that gone to anyone?

Ms RUSH: No, it has not. I can say for people seeking asylum that they are not eligible. There have been some great initiatives—and for people who are homeless—but not if you are holding a temporary visa.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Literally if someone walks in the door and says, "I am homeless" they just have to go away?

Ms RUSH: The limited response—sorry, Ms Pellicano, if I am cutting across you—is through Link2home, which is State-funded. All Link2home can offer is two nights' accommodation, so it is crisis accommodation. The question is, then what? We have been raising that with Link2home through Department of Premier and Cabinet, through Multicultural NSW and Housing. They are saying, even on the ground—often it is the first port of call from the person answering the phone—that, "You are not eligible. You are on a temporary visa". We pushed through that and you are eligible, but for two nights only.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Where we have seen great flexibility we have seen—that was ordinarily the case for an emergency for everyone, but it remained two days rather than two weeks or whatever? I am just confirming that.

Ms PELLICANO: I think one of the biggest challenges is that once people enter into a refuge for longer term support there needs to be a sustainable exit pathway that includes access to income. For people seeking asylum we are dealing with—particularly now—largely a no-income population, so we cannot move through the steps to exit people onto a safe pathway.

The CHAIR: Where are people living right now? You spoke about three or four families in a single house. How common is that?

Ms RUSH: We find it incredibly common. People are living across Sydney. All of us between our agencies provide a certain amount of accommodation. We pay for hostel accommodation. We do a whole myriad of responses in terms of how we can support someone where they are. A lot of people are not on leases. When we see people when we are delivering food—and I have done it myself to see what it is like—we see people come out of garages. People are sharing rooms, apartments and are constantly on the move. You look at that impact on children. I think there are 16,000 children seeking asylum that were dependent. In New South Wales we are looking at probably around 5,000 children. You have got that constant move, but it is wherever you can find it. When you are earning and getting the income, people have been able to pay rent. This is the COVID impact that we are looking at.

Ms BARBERO: Every week we are seeing our cohort as they come to shop. We talk to them and find out what is going on. Increasingly they are moving into each other's houses. But there was that group—like, for example, the LGBTIQ kids from CALD backgrounds who were already living in someone's house and sleeping on a couch. We are seeing more and more people moving in together—even garages and cars. We have had people living in cars for weeks and weeks and weeks. We have to call families, often from the same cultural background, to ask if they have got rooms. We have placed 16 students that are here from private colleges into homes. We have had to do that. We have had to ask for community goodwill. The community are rallying around that, because they cannot access the mechanisms that exist because they are not eligible.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: I just want to clarify the numbers. When you talked about 40,000 in New South Wales and then 5,000 children, are the children in addition to the 40,000?

Ms RUSH: No, as part of that.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: As part of that. When you gave us the figures at the beginning about you basically supporting 1,100 people, does that include kids or is that just their parents?

Ms RUSH: We are supporting 5,000 people, but in terms of food we are getting out to 1,100 households. That includes a whole—

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, that would be a lot of children. I am just interested in the—

Ms RUSH: Yes, it is children.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: —number of children who I think are very hidden in all of this.

Ms RUSH: I think all the people are hidden but particularly that vulnerability.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It varies.

The CHAIR: Ms Pellicano?

Ms PELLICANO: I just want to add that overcrowding is of huge concern. We are looking at, for example, just recently a woman with a child who is living on somebody's living room floor approaching the centre saying that she is going to be evicted from that housing because she cannot afford any rental payment. There are these informal situations. They are very precarious and so our financial assistance program is now paying for a co-contribution to a rental payment but her and her child are living on somebody's floor.

The CHAIR: But with that crowded accommodation when we have the poverty impacts we also a pandemic. Are there any services at a State level looking at the overcrowding and trying to address it if, for no other reason, than to prevent what may well be a very real severe risk to the rest of society in a pandemic? Is anybody doing it?

Ms RUSH: There has been some work coordinated through Multicultural NSW involving housing and a number of government departments because all of us keep raising it and saying that something has to give.

The CHAIR: Multicultural NSW has done something. What about NSW Health? Do you know if NSW Health has taken an interest or concern in this?

Ms RUSH: They have taken an interest. We work closely with the Ministry of Health and with different local health districts. They are aware of it and in terms of where they have offered practical support is if someone becomes unwell they said they would accommodate the family and do that level of support. Someone did get COVID. But I think this is why this is such a great opportunity. Really, we can keep talking about it but we are not getting much traction.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: The Government has announced a lot of funding. I am very interested though in how that has filtered through. I know that there is approximately \$10 million for food security. But it is the case, is it not, that Addison Road did not receive any funding from that? Can you talk a little bit about the direct support that your organisations have received from the State Government?

Ms BARBERO: We have not received anything other than the EPA gave us \$26,000 because we do food rescue.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That was in the works anyway, was it not? That was part of its program around reducing food waste?

Ms BARBERO: That is right, and we have been doing that.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It is not COVID related?

Ms BARBERO: No, it is not COVID related.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: It is just coincidental really.

Ms BARBERO: But we were screaming. I mean, we were desperate. You know, we had so many people coming to us at all hours of the day so we were desperate. Because we had had a relationship with the EPA we called the EPA. They, on our behalf, tried but there was some leftover funding in one of the rounds that they had previously given money for so they gave us \$26,000. But other than that we have received nothing despite all of our attempts to send letters as well

It is good that Foodbank and OzHarvest received money for food distribution but they rely on organisations like ours that are embedded in the community who have relationships with the community and who are able to mobilise and organise the community and who are in a location where it is convenient for the

community as well. But more than that we have all the infrastructure, procedures and policy to be able to do food, not just any food, but culturally appropriate food and fresh fruit and vegetables—so the freezers and the fridges and the refrigerated vans. These are really important because people need to have good nutritious food. So that is one part. But with Foodbank we had to buy from them because we had too many people. The demand was just way too big.

Even amongst our donors, some of them closed during the beginning of the pandemic as well so that corridor of food distribution was closed. The only corridor that we had open to us was buying food from Foodbank. With OzHarvest we receive meals because people come to us. We have about 4,000 people who come a week physically during the week. We can also supplement their groceries with meals and we give those away. But we did not receive anything at all; yet other organisations that do not do food and do not have the infrastructure received funding to do food. It does not make sense in an emergency.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Can you explain this to me more? You said "they rely on organisations like ours" and you then explained your infrastructure. I take it that "they" was Foodbank and OzHarvest. Is that right?

Ms BARBERO: As well, yes. We buy food from them and then we disperse that.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: At what sort of price?

Ms BARBERO: So far in the past five months we have spent \$93,000.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I accept that. That was part of your initial evidence in your opening statement. I am genuinely asking this: How does Foodbank charge you for food? If they are charging you for food is that at some form of discount?

Ms BARBERO: Yes. It is at a discount

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Is that funded out of this \$10 million or thereabouts that they got from the State Government?

Ms BARBERO: Foodbank has always supplied civil society organisations with discounted food—and always—and they continue to do that and they have continued to do that during the pandemic.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Did the extra \$10 million they got result in a discount or just a greater distribution of more food?

Ms BARBERO: For six weeks we got a \$750 weekly discount from them in our purchases.

The CHAIR: What about St Francis? From where were you sourcing your food? Is it the same?

Ms PELLICANO: Yes. We put in a weekly order to Foodbank NSW as well. We get a weekly delivery from OzHarvest but then we are also reliant on community donations. We ask our parishes, our volunteers and our community supporters to run food drives for us. We get weekly donations delivered by the community to supplement the products that we get in Foodbank NSW and OzHarvest. That is not those purchases from Foodbank NSW. We do not purchase food from OzHarvest but that is not enough to meet the needs of the community.

The CHAIR: Did you benefit from a short-term discount in the same way as Addison Road or is it just the usual semi-commercial relationship with Foodbank?

Ms PELLICANO: Yes. During this COVID period we have not negotiated a discounted rate from Foodbank NSW.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I think I am right in saying the chief executive officer of Foodbank was somewhat ebullient about the additional funding that was received—and please do not take this as criticism of anyone. I am wondering what the \$10 million was used for because that chief executive officer—I think it is the correct title and I am not playing games—was surprised that the quantity exceeded his expectations. I am wondering where it went, or is going.

The CHAIR: I do not know if these witnesses can answer that. The Committee invited Foodbank to appear but it declined our invitation to come and give evidence. If these witnesses can, they may.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: I think, because there is almost an implicit complaint that, for instance, Addison Road did not get the funding directly, I suspect I know why the funding went to two organisations—because it was quick to get it out the door. But if that was the wrong model, I am just interested in that. Ms Barbero?

Ms BARBERO: If you like I can talk about a model.

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Sure.

Ms BARBERO: I do not think it is the wrong model to give it to those big organisations because they have the kind of reach that we do not. So I think that is a good strategy that it goes to those big organisations. But for vulnerable people to receive the food, then it needs to go to another layer in the community that is also well set up and that knows where the vulnerabilities are, like my colleagues here. There is no way that OzHarvest or Foodbank will know where the vulnerabilities are among their communities. Like us, we are embedded in the community. We are not nationwide but we know where the vulnerabilities are. People know us, they come to us, they request from us. They organise around their group.

So, to me, the model is great that it goes to the big food distribution organisation but it should not ignore what is down on the ground they can easily deploy because you need to be effective and efficient with that deployment and you need all that infrastructure. The New South Wales Government has invested, the EPA has invested, in not just Addison Road Community Organisation but throughout New South Wales there are these incredible non-government agencies on the ground throughout the State that are ready, capable and able because they have all the infrastructure that is needed, including all the policies, the relationship with the donors, or the farmers, depending where they are and they can quickly then disperse to where it is needed. They know their community. They know whoever their community are and who is in need, and that is what I am saying. It stopped at Foodbank and OzHarvest and I am saying it should go one step down so it is in the community.

The CHAIR: What do you make of the St Francis and the Asylum Seeker Centre proposal?

Ms RUSH: I support what Ms Barbero is saying very much so. I think what it also points to is a huge need for food. We get about \$200,000 worth of food donated from a whole range of groups like Rural Australian refugees, Blue Mountains refugees, and a lot of people come from civil society but we are struggling to get food to where people are living and I think that is the local knowledge, is it not? We also purchase from Foodbank and supplement in a variety of ways and work in with OzHarvest to get their buying power so we can feed more people.

Ms PELLICANO: We operate on a very similar model. I think as we have been saying that there is real concern around food insecurity in the community, and the numbers are just increasing. We are doing an intake per week of about 130 people and their request is always for rental arrears assistance, crisis accommodation or for food. We know that this demand for service delivery on the ground is going to increase.

The CHAIR: In short, the funding going to Foodbank and OzHarvest spend doing that large-scale organisational work you support, but then the food should be being distributed through these smaller organisations which have the connections in society. It is not coming through to you free, it is coming through to you at the same rates of pay before the pandemic—

Ms BARBERO: And also at the local level, because we know our community, so we work a lot with Muslim communities or people in boarding houses that have different dietary requirements and so we can, in our distribution centre which is 1,000 square metres—and we have so many volunteers—thank you to Play for Life and all the supporting people who have rallied around it and members of our community—that we can actually prepare food according to people's needs, diets, their living conditions, people that do not have access to a microwave or cooking facilities. There are so many different requirements and we can cater to that because we know our communities as well. But when you are just getting things from these big organisations, which is great and we said it supplements what we do, but it does not have those culturally appropriate or other requirements that our communities need.

Ms PELLICANO: Maybe one thing to add to that is that the need to be able to distribute to the community has increased. So the pressures on the organisation to pivot the services that we are doing unbelievable amounts of logistics. All of us are using 10, 20, 30 a lot of volunteers within our services to be able to deliver this service. It is a lot of cars on the road, it is a lot of people needing personal protective equipment. We do rely a lot on the goodwill of our volunteers. We do not, for example, claim costs for petrol to be delivering groceries to the houses of people. I guess there is an additional cost to all the services to be able to distribute the food within the community. For our service we are still doing Foodbank face-to-face. We have not gone outreach but we have had to re-arrange the service to be able to accommodate that so we can deliver it in a COVID-19 safe way.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Ms Pellicano, I refer to the figures that you spoke to the Committee earlier about that in the Cumberland area there is an estimation of around 2,587 loss of jobs and 60 to 70 homeless. What is that report? Where did it come from? Will you talk us through that as it is obviously very concerning.

Ms PELLICANO: It is a report that was commissioned by the Refugee Council of Australia, COVID-19 and humanitarian migrants on temporary visas: assessing the public costs. The report is really trying to have a look at a couple of the main issues that we have been addressing today which are: financial disadvantage, homelessness, mental health and projecting on the numbers of people who are in the community. They have done modelling to look at what the cost to the State and Federal Government might be.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is that broken down by local government area?

Ms PELLICANO: No, they did only one supplementary piece of research around the Cumberland local government area.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: That is why it is so specific?

Ms PELLICANO: Yes.

Ms RUSH: The Refugee Council as well has also looked at it through where people are seen in local government areas, and that is also available.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Essentially all of your services are dealing with people who have fallen through the cracks of other government support. Ms Barbero, will you talk to us about what has happened with gig economy workers, arts and creatives, who have not been eligible? My perception is that your services have seen a huge number of those people, obviously where you are located in the inner west is partly where people live. Will you talk through the experience of what you have seen of those people coming through and what issues do they face?

Ms BARBERO: We see a lot of people come through who say to us that they are not eligible for JobKeeper but they are on JobSeeker. Nonetheless they are still struggling.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Is that partly because of high rent?

Ms BARBERO: Yes, virtually overnight people lost their job and they lived on a little bit of savings but that was not enough now and has all run out. Most of them are not working, some have gone back to work but it is very, very reduced hours. For example, a lot of students are doing Uber Eats but some of them doing two hours or four hours a day as well.

The Hon. PENNY SHARPE: Yes, but the worst thing is those Uber Eats drivers are then using food pantries because that is where they pick up their food. It is extraordinary.

Ms BARBERO: Yes, but also we are seeking a lot of people around us that work in the entertainment industry as well. So a lot of people from the arts, events, shows and music. And also pilots and people that worked for Qantas. We have a lot of volunteers who are coming in that worked for Qantas. They are quite fearful of what next? Nobody knows what next. Some of them have partners who have lost jobs as well or some of them have partners who did not work. Some of them have high mortgages like they are people "it could be me". They have got mortgages and all of a sudden they just cannot pay and they do not know what is going to happen when they have to start paying as well. We have a really big cohort of transgender people as well who do not come out now because of vulnerability as well and they are also suffering also because there is a lot of medical issues as well among that cohort.

Another big cohort that we are seeing working with is sex workers as well. They have stopped working as well and so they are coming also to see us. A lot of them are homeless, so Australian sex workers are helping them by bringing them into their homes. It is endless. It is really endless, but there is definitely a lot of anxiety, a lot of fear around what is next. One of the things that we did at Addison Road, in terms of connectivity and to keep in touch with people, is that we asked the different social groups to organise themselves so then we could disperse. They are not organisations, they are not not-for-profits, they are not associations, but they are just social groups and they have leaders amongst them. Those leaders have gone round and found out who is vulnerable, who is in need, who is about to be evicted, who needs a place to stay. They help each other basically and they come to Addison Road. They pack hampers themselves often, so our warehouse allows for that to happen and then they distribute food to their communities.

The CHAIR: If I understand, all of you have a common view that if it is asylum seekers who have no access to income or foreign students who have almost no access to income, one of the critical requirements is some kind of certainty and ongoing income for those populations. Otherwise it is just going to be crisis to crisis to crisis. Is that right?

Ms BARBERO: Correct.

The CHAIR: Your ask for us at the State level is to lobby the Federal Government to extend Federal support to those groups. Is that right?

Ms BARBERO: Exactly.

The CHAIR: But can I ask you in terms of running your—

The Hon. TREVOR KHAN: Sorry, that was a yes.

The CHAIR: That was a yes. That was a uniform yes. Thank you Trevor. But at a State level, in terms of funding your organisations, Ms Pellicano, you spoke about the additional cost just simply of delivering all the extra food and, Ms Rush, I am sure there were additional costs of all those calls and servicing all those calls, and Ms Barbero, the thousands of people coming to your centre—in terms of running your organisations what, if any, additional State funding have any of you received? What would it take and what sort of a quantum of money are we talking about to meaningfully assist your organisations given the increased demand?

Ms RUSH: The need for a regular income is going to make the difference. For people seeking asylum, it was what was referred to as the Status Resolution Support Service and that meant people got 89 per cent of Newstart. That was still below the poverty line, but people could live on it. That would alleviate a lot of the stress that people are under now. That was ceased in March 2018 and that has caused huge distress where—and obviously each organisation will speak for themselves. We cannot pay someone's bond. What we are doing is tinkering at the edge. We are not really keeping people safe. We are not able to maintain their rental. That needs a regular income.

We have got a proportion of the money provided by New South Wales State that came in at the end of June and that was effectively \$1.65 million divided between six organisations working for people seeking asylum or temporary—particularly people seeking asylum. There was an additional \$500,000 that was split between six agencies to allow each agency to employ an additional worker, but that is almost the administration of it. It is not the cars on the road, as Miriam Pellicano spoke about. It is still not meeting the need. There is so much hidden need that we need to address, but it is never going to be enough without a regular income. We get 4 per cent of our funds via State Government, 1 per cent via local and the rest we fundraise through civil society.

Ms PELLICANO: Yes. I think at House of Welcome we are in a very similar situation to the Asylum Seekers Centre. We also did receive some of the Multicultural NSW money at the end of June but that is \$1.65 million between six organisations statewide, not just in Sydney metropolitan, so it really needs to stretch a long way. The additional funds for staffing is to administer that fund; it is not to actually absorb the additional work that has been created across this pandemic, and the solution needs to be a regular income. The emergency funding that we have received is, as stated, emergency. They are ad hoc payments and they cannot sustain safety for people, rental payments. The need is now. It is ongoing. It is this year. It is next year.

We know that people seeking asylum will find it very hard to re-enter the labour market even when things might start to change, when that might be. They are already at such a huge disadvantage and they are already at such a high financial disadvantage. We have got people coming to the centre easily with \$4,000 or \$5,000 of accrued rental arrears. Without a regular income to be able to just get through the day, today I think we are looking at a housing crisis.

Ms RUSH: Can I just add one more point—I think Miriam Pellicano touched on it earlier as well and Rosanna Barbero has. We are talking about people. It is not only the cost. It is when we are seeing that mental health impact and I think that people cannot see light at the end of the tunnel. It is like they can see that there is going to be a massive demand or competition for the jobs that are available. They do not have the safety net. Their mental health is really impacted and we are seeing that. There is a human toll to all of this on top of the financial amount of money. This can be alleviated and it is about choice.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Rush, you said at the beginning that many of the people you are supporting would have three to four part-time jobs. What kind of industries were they in—just to paint a picture for us?

Ms RUSH: They were the industries that were affected. A lot of people were working in coffee shops during the day; they might have been working in security at night; they might have been working in bars. They were within the arts community as well. A lot of them were doing cleaning jobs, so with the offices closing they lost that. There has been lots of goodwill but it has been—that kind of work is the majority of work that people will do and then lost. Then we can see Qantas pilots applying to do the shelf stacking at Woolworths, where a lot of people were doing that before. The competition is hard but that is—there is always a diversity of peoples' skill sets, but in the whole that is where people get their first experience working in Australia.

Ms BARBERO: Just on behalf of migrant students and international students, they also worked in those jobs and they would do any jobs. Even now, as things opened up a little bit, about 54 have gone to work on farms. They still keep in contact with us. They are earning \$6 an hour or \$8 an hour and living in crowded accommodation in rural areas and wanting to come back because they cannot sustain that. But I also think that they should be afforded the rights that citizens have and the safety nets and access to the welfare system because it will be a New South Wales problem if we do have an outbreak. New South Wales will probably have to pay a lot more than what it would cost to give these people a decent payment.

The CHAIR: You gave the example of Singapore where it was migrant workers in overcrowded accommodation which led to the public health problems. That is where the COVID-19 broke out in Singapore. Even for just narrow self-interest, putting to one side what is right—

Ms BARBERO: Yes. It will be a bigger disaster than to give people a decent income. I would also like to say that New Zealand and Canada have given all migrants—and Cambodia, which is a country I spent most of my life in and a very poor country, during the pandemic also announced that every foreigner will be accorded the same rights as citizens. I just wanted to respond to the question about funding. Apart from what I said earlier—that we received the \$26,000 from the EPA—we have received zero from the New South Wales State Government. We are fundraised, so we have stretched our resources and we have done well. We raised over \$100,000 from our communities.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: Ms Barbero, you talked about how you received a \$750 discount on what you are usually spending from Foodbank. You said that it was \$93,000 over the course of the pandemic. Can you give us an idea of how much a week you will be spending at Foodbank?

Ms BARBERO: Probably about \$9,000. I can be more accurate if you like with the figures.

The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS: No. It gives us a sense of how much that is actually impacting on what you provide.

The CHAIR: Have either of your organisations put a budget pitch in to the State Government and asked for specific funding?

Ms BARBERO: I did after I spoke to Minister Gareth Ward.

The CHAIR: Has St Francis?

Ms PELLICANO: Yes. We applied for the funding that came out in the first tranche that was administered by Multicultural NSW.

The CHAIR: If you are able to provide us that on notice, so we can have a look at the kind of quantum and the kind of services you were applying for and did not receive, I think that would be of use to the Committee. On behalf of all the Committee again, thank you for the work you do. The stress and anxiety that you and your staff and your volunteers must face given the extreme need you are servicing is very real. We collectively very much extraordinarily appreciate the work you do. The job is to help you.

Ms BARBERO: I have some documents that I would like to submit. Is that permissible?

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely. Just hand them to the secretariat and we will have a quick look at them in a deliberative. Did you want to speak to them very briefly, Ms Barbero?

Ms BARBERO: No, I summarised most of the content already.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That concludes today's hearing. We will have a short deliberative.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 12:45.