

**EDUCATION AND HEALTH
STANDING COMMITTEE**

**INQUIRY INTO THE ADEQUACY AND APPROPRIATENESS OF
PREVENTION AND TREATMENT SERVICES FOR ALCOHOL AND
ILLCIT DRUG PROBLEMS IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA**

**TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE
TAKEN AT PERTH
THURSDAY, 02 SEPTEMBER 2010**

SESSION FOUR

Members

**Dr J.M. Woollard (Chairman)
Mr P. Abetz (Deputy Chairman)
Ms L.L. Baker
Mr P.B. Watson
Mr I.C. Blayney**

Hearing commenced at 11.41 am

TOOVEY, MRS CHERIE GAYE

Tour Presenter, Parliamentary Education Office, examined:

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: On behalf of the Education and Health Standing Committee I thank you for your interest and your appearance before us today. The purpose of this hearing is to assist the committee in gathering evidence for its inquiry into the adequacy and appropriateness of prevention and treatment services for alcohol and illicit drug problems in Western Australia. You have been provided with a copy of the committee's specific terms of reference.

At this stage, I would like to introduce myself, Peter Abetz, and the other members of the committee present. The usual chair is Dr Janet Woollard—I am usually the deputy chair—Peter Watson and Lisa Baker; David Worth and Lucy Roberts, committee staff; and Helen from Hansard.

This Education and Health Standing Committee is a committee of the Legislative Assembly of the Parliament of Western Australia. This hearing is a formal procedure of the Parliament and therefore commands the same respect given to proceedings in the house. Even though the committee is not asking you to provide evidence on oath or affirmation, it is important that you understand that any deliberate misleading of the committee may be regarded as a contempt of Parliament. This is a public hearing and Hansard is making a transcript of the proceedings for the public record. If you refer to any documents during your evidence, it would assist if you could provide the full title for the record.

Before we proceed, I need to ask you a series of questions. Have completed the "Details of Witness" form?

Mrs Toovey: Yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Do you understand the notes at the bottom of the form about giving evidence to a parliamentary committee?

Mrs Toovey: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Did you receive and read the information for witnesses briefing sheet provided with the "Details of Witness" form?

Mrs Toovey: Yes.

The CHAIRMAN: Do have any questions about being a witness at today's hearing?

Mrs Toovey: No.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Would you please state your full name and the capacity in which you appear before the committee today.

Mrs Toovey: Cherie Gaye Toovey, from the Parliamentary Education Office, and being one of the organisers of the Hear Me program to remote Aboriginal community schools.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you. You are familiar with the terms of reference and obviously aspects of your work are not related to this inquiry. Perhaps you could tell us what the program exactly is; how many schools you visited in the Kimberley and Pilbara areas; and a little about what you picked up during your work that relates to the topic of our inquiry.

Mrs Toovey: The program came about because I also work as a tour guide and was in the unique position of going into several remote Aboriginal communities and talking to Aboriginal people and

seeing the total irrelevance of Parliament to them. One day I was thinking about it and said to Jane Gray, my boss at the time, that if we were going to make a difference in the future, we needed to scratch the surface now. We were never going to make a difference overnight, but we needed to start somewhere. And so the Hear Me program grew out of that. I wrote a submission to say why we thought this was important and the Parliament adopted the idea.

Within the framework of your inquiry, I have tried to structure my thoughts in terms of the relevance from an alcohol–student point of view.

Our office identified 77 remote Aboriginal community schools in Western Australia, as defined by the education department. Of those, we could not get to a couple because of unseasonal conditions; a couple did not want us to come; and a few of them did not have a high enough percentage of Indigenous students. In the end, we went to, I think, about 66 remote Aboriginal community schools. We went to everything from Department of Education schools to Aboriginal independent community schools, Catholic schools and CAPS—Christian Aboriginal Parent-Directed Schools. We covered the whole range of the types of schools in communities.

The idea was to talk about Parliament being their voice. We did not go into the processes and procedures of Parliament. When I first talked to Jane about it, I explained that working as a tour guide, one of the mottos that motivates me is —

Do not satisfy your vanity by teaching a great many things.

...

Put there just a spark. If there is some good inflammable stuff, it will catch fire.

It was looking for that spark. We did not know where the spark would be in amongst the remote community schools so we spread the net very, very broadly. You could see a few people in particular who really cottoned on to our message. The response was overwhelmingly positive. It has to have been positive, given one of the feedback comments was —

A great introduction to the workings of Parliament and a step towards authentic empowerment.

We were told that the students would not open up within the short time frame that we would be there because they are very shy and very reserved, so the program was structured around get-to-know-you games and was very interactive; for example, these very tactile, fluorescent-coloured, googly balls were used.

Ms L.L. BAKER: They are great! Can I have it?

Mr P.B. WATSON: That is the end of Lisa for the day!

Mrs Toovey: The shy students could hide behind the ball, but while they were massaging it, pushing it and pulling it, they could forget about the other people being there and so we were able to break the ice.

We also took a toy bilby with us called Polly: Polly was a play on politician; a reference to Polly Farmer, who was given the nickname Polly because he talked all the time as a six year old and was named after Polly the parrot—the kids just loved it—and because Parliament is a place where people talk. It was at a very basic level, but Parliament is a voice; it is where people talk. And Polly kept a photo album.

The things that the students opened up with were quite staggering. One of the two most significant came from a girl at a dry community in the Kimberley who was approaching her eighteenth birthday.

[11.50 am]

She said, “I want to have alcohol on my eighteenth birthday, like everybody else does; but this is a dry community so I can’t have alcohol at a party here. Everybody says go into town and have your party there, but I know what’s going to happen. People will get drunk, they’ll fight and white people will say, ‘Look at that—typical drunk boongs.’ I don’t want that either.” But she said, “I would like to have a drink for my eighteenth birthday.” She shared that so openly. Another girl said, “Can I tell you anything?” I said, “Yes, you can.” She said, “I want the old drunk men to stop wanting sex with me.” The reality of just how much the kids shared was really quite significant.

We went right across the state, even to Kiwirrkurra, which is 1 400 kilometres from Alice Springs and 1 500 kilometres from Kalgoorlie—as remote as it gets. But the issues of alcohol, drugs and violence were reflected right across the board, right throughout the state. Probably one of the tragic ones—a young child said, “If the nurse came more often, my little brothers wouldn’t have got as sick.” I said, “Have your little brothers been ill?” The teacher said, “The hierarchy here, when there is money, the feeding order is: the father, the mother, the dogs, the kids.” There was not enough food, so the two little boys were eating dirt and stones. The stones clogged up their insides and they were quite ill for a while. We would go back to our motel at night and think the issues are phenomenal. Several of the comments that were made, particularly by elder women who were helping out at the school when we were there—they would say, “You’re the first people who have come and actually talked to us.” The comment was made to us, “So many government agencies come in with their agenda and they tick the boxes, and then they go again”, whereas our program was all about, “You can make a difference. Change is going to come when you feel empowered to make a change.” That was the “Hear Me!” program. We used red and blue mini frisbees with the Parliament logo as part of our teaching tool. The red Frisbee represented the Legislative Council; the blue the Legislative Assembly. We talked about the symbols. The frisbees had the Parliament web address on it, and they loved these. There was also the introduction to Aboriginal members of Parliament. We started with Neville Bonner. We included Carol Martin, Ben Wyatt and Ernie Bridge. We talked about these role models as well, and the possibility to make a difference, to have a voice.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: There was obviously a common theme of alcohol issues. Were there any comments about illicit drugs like ganja, marijuana, that sort of thing?

Mrs Toovey: Absolutely—lots of comments about the drugs as well, particularly the closer you got to town. I brought Derby’s scroll—there are several references to drugs. It is just part and parcel of the communities that we went to. The alcohol is a problem. The drugs also tend to be a problem. On the education side of it, at one of the schools we went to the teacher was just finishing a lesson on alcohol. It is difficult to know where the education is going to be most effective. When we were at another Kimberley community school—although it was not alcohol or drugs—one little boy was sitting there and not entering into the preparation of brainstorming the scrolls. I said to him, “Have you got anything that you would like to put on the scroll?” He said, “I don’t know how to say it.” I said, “What are you trying to say?” He said, “At school, we learn all about diabetes and how it affects us as a people. I’m supposed to go home and tell my mum.” His mum was a single mother. He said, “I can’t remember all the information. I worry that she’s going to get really sick and die.” That was an incredible burden for that young boy. The logical way to educate is through the schools and take this message home, but the responsibility of that message was too great for him.

The CHAIRMAN: Do you write a report after each of these visits?

Mrs Toovey: We have written notes on each of the visits that we went to. We did not go in to judge. We did not go in for any other reason than to bring their voice back to Parliament. A lot of these anecdotal things are actually things that do not have a place in any formal setting.

The CHAIRMAN: Even from what you have just said to us this morning, I believe the role that you have played is very, very valuable. You have represented us very well in going out on these visits. I certainly would like to see you continue in this role. I would like to read through the reports

from your visits. Could I ask you, by way of supplementary information, to provide the committee with a copy of these reports?

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Cherie, what format are the reports in? I am a little concerned that we do not want —

The CHAIRMAN: They do not identify the people, do they?

Mrs Toovey: No.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Or would not identify the community either?

Mrs Toovey: We did a report on each school under the school at the end of each day. Certainly for internal members' perusal it would not be a problem.

The CHAIRMAN: Once we receive that, we are able to —

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: As long as they are not made public, that would be my concern.

The CHAIRMAN: Once we receive that, we are able to look at that ourselves and make a determination to use that as a committee. We do not, as a committee, have to identify the areas.

Mrs Toovey: There is also the report which is currently with the Clerk and the Speaker. This is a copy of the formal report of the outcomes.

The CHAIRMAN: Also, we would like a copy of that report.

Ms L.L. BAKER: You went to 66 schools. Can you give me some idea about the prevalence of alcohol as an issue? Was that in 100 per cent of the 66 schools, or 30 per cent or 90 per cent?

Mrs Toovey: In the remotest dry communities, it was not as big an issue. With this One Arm Point scroll, there is no mention of alcohol. The closer you get to the towns, the greater the problems—on the whole, well over 90 per cent, even amongst dry communities.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Of the issues that were reported to you by 90 per cent of the children in the communities, how did alcohol rate on the list of, say, alcohol to fighting or whatever? Was it the top issue or the middle issue? Did you get a feel for that?

Mrs Toovey: The top issue: they want lawn on their footy ovals.

Ms L.L. BAKER: I can understand that!

Mrs Toovey: Yes. After that, alcohol was probably the next highest issue in terms of things that they want to see changed.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Did any themes emerge in terms of how the kids thought it could be dealt with?

Mrs Toovey: They had a few ideas. They do not see intervention as being heavy handed. They just want protection in whatever shape or form that comes in.

[12 noon]

Mrs Toovey: They want to make the choice to not be part of that culture themselves. One boy said, "I don't know how I will not drink like everybody else does", because the pressure is on to be part of the group with the drugs and the alcohol. He had seen the devastation in his family, he had resisted, he was a young teenager, but he did not know how long he would have the ability to keep resisting. It is not just the alcohol and the drugs; humbugging is part of the whole culture as well, and the gambling, which is becoming a huge issue.

Mr P.B. WATSON: It is huge up there, is it not?

Mrs Toovey: Phenomenal.

Mr P.B. WATSON: I notice that the scroll reads, "No gas", and "Don't tear up our environment", and "Sport's Best Festival for Kids"; what age group are we looking at here?

Mrs Toovey: The program was aimed at upper primary and lower secondary, but the schools were so welcoming and they were so glad to have something of this nature that we had five to 17 year olds. We had been told there would only be 10 children there, and there would be 36 kids. We had to think on our feet and be very, very adaptable because of the broad range of ages. We ended up using soft toys and doing interactive games with younger children as to decision making, right through to value lines and what they value with older students. We would start with a very simple statement like, “Dogs make better pets than cats”, and they would position themselves along the value line and discuss with the other people who strongly agreed, who agreed, who was neutral, who disagreed, and who strongly disagreed to work out if they were in the right place. We would then use that to keep raising more and more issues and look at how to come to a consensus.

The CHAIRMAN: I am going to leave; I would just like to congratulate you on the absolutely wonderful program you ran. Because Peter missed a couple of minutes of this, one thing that he missed when he was out of the room was that the number one thing they asked for was football ovals.

Mrs Toovey: It was grass.

The CHAIRMAN: Grass on the ovals was the number one thing—the second thing was to have the alcohol problems addressed. But I thought you would want to know that one.

Mr P.B. WATSON: It is amazing; the kids just want to play sport.

Mrs Toovey: Sport is such a positive thing. A principal from one of the communities came and met us at the airstrip, and as we were driving in he said, “Welcome to my intensive care ward.” He was very disillusioned. He said, “Everybody here is on a drip, and they are happy that way.” He was a new principal, and he was a bit shocked. The children would arrive at school in the morning, they would take off their dirty clothes, they would shower and put on a clean school uniform, they would be given breakfast, they would be given lunch, and at the end of the school day they would change back into their clothes, which would have been washed, and sent home. The principal’s comment was, “Stolen generation—hello”, because all the responsibility had been taken off the parents. He wanted to change that very, radically, but it is always the welfare of the children that is important. The schools that offered the lunch program and involved the community, where there was a partnership with the community and where the mothers would always be there to cook lunch for the students, were functioning best. One teacher commented that it was like the school had just landed from outer space in their community. I looked at this school that had a big wire fence around it, a green bit of lawn for them to play on, and posters that featured very European-looking children, and I thought: “You’re not far from the truth”, in terms of how the school was perceived, rather than being something that was vital to the community. The issues to see change in the future begin with the school engaging the community and not being something that is perceived as being white man’s stuff.

Mr P.B. WATSON: We went to Kalumburu for an inquiry into regional sport, and I said to the guys, “Why don’t we take a basketball and a pump up so we can play basketball?” I took my basketball up there, and I said, “Let’s see if any kids want to play.” We started off with 12 kids; at the end of the day, about 25 games later, there were about 150 kids there just coming out of—they do not know where they came from.

Mrs Toovey: They love their sport.

Mr P.B. WATSON: They love their sport, and, gee whiz, they were good at it, too.

Mrs Toovey: We met a young man in Leonora who was a very talented runner; all he wanted was to know how to further his career. We did not have a clue, and that was not why we were there, but he had a hunger to succeed.

Mr P.B. WATSON: There has been an article in the paper about him; he wants to run at the Olympics. Robert de Castella is doing a program, and he went to Leonora to see this young boy.

Mrs Toovey: Sport is a really positive thing in their lives.

Mr P.B. WATSON: And it keeps them healthy, too; healthy in body and mind.

Mrs Toovey: Absolutely; yes.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Are there any plans to bring students from the remote communities to Parliament at all?

Mrs Toovey: One of the amazing results of this program is that two of the community schools were coming to Perth for an excursion, and although neither had booked to come to Parliament, they fitted in time to come to Parliament and see their scroll hanging in Parliament. That is incredibly positive, because we are saying to them, "Parliament is your voice, and if you want change, then use your Parliament to help you change." When the program started, Jane and I said that the results of this will not be seen in this or the next generation, although change may start happening; but knowing how to use the voice of Parliament for change is important. The strong women and the Strong Women's Group throughout the Kimberley is a great asset when it comes to support for these sorts of things.

Mr P.B. WATSON: And funding?

Mrs Toovey: Funding is the tough one. We were really grateful with —

Mr P.B. WATSON: Have you got enough funds to continue?

Mrs Toovey: Not at this stage because of the cuts across the board; it is a decision that will be made. This was originally a trial, and it was such a successful trial—I think more successful than anybody could have imagined, as demonstrated by the schools coming into Parliament when they are in Perth. The teachers are so transient and there is a lack of permanence, so by providing resources for the teacher they are able to follow-up whilst they are in the community, and they were appreciative of being able to take the resources when they went elsewhere. We are equipping teachers to teach about Parliament and civics education and keep repeating it, and that is a secondary bonus to the Hear Me! program. Ideally, we would like to get to every school every two years, and the simplicity of the program and what we have in mind if we are able to proceed, would be to go back to this in four years' time because you would have a totally different group of students, so we keep it simple. This was Hear Me! We want the next program to be Hear Me! Hear My Community, so it is actually building on this starting point.

[12.10 pm]

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Is there anything else you would like to share with us before we wrap up?

Mrs Toovey: Petrol sniffing is still an issue as well. When we were at one community, the school principal took us around. There was a five-year-old walking along and he said, "That's the tragedy. Those brain cells don't ever recover." It was not a huge issue as much as it was in the past, but petrol sniffing is still an issue. The foetal alcohol was very evident in a lot of the schools and one of the comments on those scrolls is "don't drink when you're pregnant". The message is there, so that is a positive thing.

The drinking camps were another issue that we were told about in the dry communities. The men go out to have their binge drinking. There are no bough sheds or shelter for them so once they have finished drinking, they do not want to stay there so they will hop in their cars and drive back to the community and that is when the accidents happen. "To put a bough shed there," one of the women was saying to us, "looks like we are condoning the drinking", but they do not want them driving back when they are drunk. So the dry communities have not got the answers either in terms of where they go.

The alcohol abuse leads to neglect of the children and we had to be prepared to be cuddled by children with scabies, lice, fleas, ticks. One classroom had ticks jumping around on the carpet. That was the reality of these kids. In the get-to-know-you games very, very early on Jane was doing that and I was joining in with the kids. The music stopped and Jane said, “Three heads”, or “four elbows”, or however many it was, and the girl who wanted to join her head next to mine had these white visible things crawling on her hair, so I said to Jane, “No more heads” after that one! But it was the willingness to get to their level where they are at and listen to the students. I think they feel pretty much disempowered. Some of the feedback was so positive: “It’s wonderful to bring politics, democracy and Parliament to the level of these students.” “A follow-up visit would be beneficial.” “Three days after your visit discussing it they particularly liked learning they could have a say, many thanks.” “It is an extremely worthwhile incursion.” The feedback was so overwhelmingly positive. The children need to be empowered to know that they can say what they, as a community, want and need.

So that is the starting point. I do not know how with this inquiry—I have read a couple of the submissions and reports online—you change the current communities, but self-esteem in the young people is the starting point.

Mr P.B. WATSON: You have got to start with the young.

Mrs Toovey: You have got to start with the young and the self-esteem that says “I am worthwhile” is I think so important. That is one of the outcomes of, again, the Hear Me program. There was one girl in particular, she would have been about 14, who just hung on every word we said and she said to me afterwards, “I could be a member of Parliament.” I said, “You could.” She said, “That’s what I’m going to aim for.” You could see that she was a leader. We always talked about the voice being forward, the leaders being a leader in your community, and these are the people who will think about being in Parliament. So that was another by-product of Bring Your Voice Back; you may one day be in Parliament.

The positive self-esteem message, I think, started with cuddling them. A number of people said nobody ever touches those kids and yet they wanted a hug. The self-esteem is where the change will come in the future. That is what I think is really, really important.

The children, again this is an observation from across the board, are really being let down by the lack of health services. The teachers expressed frustration time and again that the ear infections can wait two weeks before the nurse would come and visit. By then, they have lost two weeks learning. Conjunctivitis spreads like wildfire through the classroom. The health services: I guess the educationalists just felt that it was compounding the difficulty of their job. The children’s absence from school is another huge one. We need to get the students to school regularly. One of the comments while we were out and about was that the principals will hop in the car and go and round kids up for school, but it is a legal requirement for children to attend school. A couple of principals and teachers commented that they would love the support of the police to actually go and enforce the students coming to school.

Mr P.B. WATSON: There are truancy officers in most regions who should be doing that and they are not.

Mrs Toovey: The attendance rate is just incredibly low.

Ms L.L. BAKER: Cherie, have you seen any communities where the Polly Farmer Foundation is working in the community on the issue of truancy and getting kids through school? Did you see any of their work?

Mrs Toovey: No. We went to a community school that had a 97 per cent attendance rate and that school was a positive place to be at. We went to schools where the attendance rate was well under 50 per cent and the teachers just cannot keep teaching and building on learning foundations in those sorts of situations. One school we were to go to rang and said, “Don’t come because we haven’t got

any students today.” Funerals, as you know, play havoc with school attendance. So really the answers are just not there. When we went to Jigalong and I noticed a dental clinic I said, “Wow! Look at that”, and the principal said, “Don’t get excited; nothing happens there.” The last time the dentist came the teachers were supposed to identify students who would need to visit the dentist, and send them. The teachers did not know that, first and foremost, but also the teachers said, “We’re not trained to know who needs to see the dentist.” Nobody went so the dentist said he is not going to bother going back.

There are no easy answers to any of these allied services that link in with education, health and policing, and yet the schools are probably the most constant in the community in terms of staffing. But even then we encountered several instances of “us” and “them” mentality—yet to be able to get alongside the community, not judge them, those people are living the way that they know how. But for their alcohol issue—and Roebourne, it was incredible. One of the comments was, “We need a sobering-up place for the old people. We need somewhere for children to go when the parents leave town.” That is just part and parcel of their experience that mum and dad, or mum, or dad, will go out to get drunk and leave the kids there.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: You mentioned one school had 97 per cent attendance, was that on the particular day that you were there or —

Mrs Toovey: No, over the 12 months prior to our visit.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Can you recall which community that was?

Mrs Toovey: That was Dawul school at Doon Doon, which is just over an hour and a bit south west of Kununurra. The teacher at that school was a mature lady who was related to both Kim Beazley and Dr Carmen Lawrence, —so she welcomed us with open arms but she just engaged the students; she was passionate about what she was doing—there are a lot of good teachers—but she had incentives. Some of the schools offer trips to Perth, Canberra or Sydney, trying to get attendance, but the big issues tend to be so far removed from a student living in a small community’s experience, that these trips are not as attractive as a visit by a footballer. That would get the students wanting to be there.

[12.20 pm]

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: Thank you for giving evidence before the committee today, a transcript of this hearing will be forwarded to you for correction of minor errors. Any such corrections must be made, and the transcript returned, within 10 days from the date of the letter attached to the transcript. If the transcript is not returned within this period it will be deemed to be correct. New material cannot be added by these corrections and the sense of your evidence cannot be altered. However, should you wish to provide additional information or elaborate on particular points, please feel free to include a supplementary submission for the committee’s consideration when you return the corrected transcript of evidence. Just a reminder that a supplementary submission, like the Hear Me report and the—what was the other item?

Mrs Toovey: The reports after each of the schools, the incidental reports and the like.

The DEPUTY CHAIRMAN: We would handle those sensitively in terms of not identifying the schools. Thank you very much.

Hearing concluded at 12.21 pm
