



LEGAL AFFAIRS AND SAFETY COMMITTEE

Members present:

Mr PS Russo MP—Chair
Mrs LJ Gerber MP
Ms SL Bolton MP
Ms JM Bush MP
Mr JE Hunt MP
Mr JM Krause MP

Visiting Member:

Mr RI Katter MP

Staff present:

Ms K O'Sullivan—Committee Secretary

PUBLIC HEARING—INQUIRY INTO THE WORKING WITH CHILDREN (INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES) AMENDMENT BILL 2021

TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 7 SEPTEMBER 2022

Palm Island

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The committee met at 11.27 am.

CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. I declare open this public hearing for the committee's inquiry into the Working with Children (Indigenous Communities) Amendment Bill 2021. My name is Peter Russo, the member for Toohey and chair of the committee. I welcome the mayor, Mislam Sam, a community representative who will do the welcome to country.

Mislam Sam then gave a welcome to country.

CHAIR: Thank you. I also would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today and pay our respects to elders past and present. We are very fortunate to live in a country with two of the oldest continuing cultures in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, whose lands, winds and waters we all share. With me here today are: Laura Gerber MP, the member for Currumbin and deputy chair; Sandy Bolton MP, the member for Noosa; Jonty Bush MP, the member for Cooper; Jason Hunt MP, the member for Caloundra; and Jon Krause MP, the member for Scenic Rim. The committee has also granted leave for Robbie Katter, the member for Traeger, to ask questions at the hearing today.

Robbie Katter introduced a bill into the Queensland parliament on 1 September 2021 and it was referred to the committee for detailed consideration. The purpose of today is to hear evidence from stakeholders, community members and submitters about their views on the bill. This hearing is a proceeding of the Queensland parliament and is subject to the parliament's standing rules and orders. Only committee members and invited witnesses may participate in the proceedings. Witnesses are not required to give evidence under oath or affirmation, but I remind witnesses that intentionally misleading the committee is a serious offence. I also remind members of the public that they may be excluded from the hearing at the discretion of the committee.

Our Hansard reporters will be making a transcript of the hearing for the committee's record of evidence. To ensure the transcript is accurate, I ask that only one person speak at a time. This will also give our witnesses the respect they deserve, recognising that it is not always easy to speak in public. Media may be present and will be subject to my direction at all times. The media rules endorsed by the committee are available from committee staff if required. All those present today should note that it is possible you might be filmed or photographed during the proceedings and images may also appear on the parliament's website or social media pages. No other photography or filming is permitted, other than expressly authorised by me. I ask everyone present to turn mobile phones off or to silent mode. The program for today has been published on the committee's webpage and there are hard copies available from committee staff.

GLEESON-HENAWAY, Ms Narelle, Executive Manager, Community Services, Palm Island Community Co. Ltd

CHAIR: Good morning, Narelle. I invite you to make an opening statement of up to five minutes, after which committee members will have some questions for you.

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: I would also like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners, the Manbarra people, and pay respects as well to the Bwgcolman people of Palm Island. I feel a bit bad that I have my back to people here, so excuse that. I am here representing the Palm Island Community Co. Our CEO, Rachel Atkinson, is an apology for today. The Palm Island Community Co. operates health and community services on Palm Island, so we employ approximately 150 people and at least 130 of those are on Palm Island; we have a small admin backup staff in Townsville. Our experience that we will talk about today is largely through employing people on Palm Island and the challenges we have had with the current blue card system as a result of that.

We have had some long-held concerns about the blue card process for many years. We know that the way it is currently administered is negatively impacting on families and communities, preventing their ability to exercise self-determination, so particularly having impacts on employment opportunities and/or caring opportunities through the foster and kinship care system. Some of the current concerns include the lengthy processing time that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander applicants, particularly in remote communities, may experience. Added to that sometimes is the lack of information or updates

to applicants in the current system through the assessment period which can create issues particularly around employment opportunities then ceasing and/or caring opportunities not being able to occur; lengthy appeals processes through the current QCAT—and we have certainly had some experiences supporting people through that process as well; assessments based on a list of offences without any context or consideration of recency of charges—that certainly is an issue, and I know from speaking with the justice group and others that they are constant challenges with the current blue card system that occur; and young people leaving care is an issue sometimes obtaining blue cards.

The issues impact on the ability of organisations to staff services, and we have certainly experienced that—that is, challenges such as not being able to offer someone an employment opportunity and therefore the flow-on effects that has to the family and the whole community just due to not being able to obtain a blue card. Sometimes it is also not just the requirement of the job that may be considered child related employment, but for some of our government funded programs we have stipulations in our service agreement that say that everyone who is employed within that service, regardless of their role, requires a blue card. That includes the transport service, the cleaner—everyone who actually works in that service—even though they are not necessarily involved in child related employment. That, again, has added some further restrictions around employment and that has a real impact on the ability to provide services to the community.

I guess our other experience is that PICC recently—this was probably a year and a half ago—started managing the foster and kinship service on Palm Island. Previously that had operated from Townsville as a fly-in fly-out service, so it is now operated by local people on Palm Island and is having a huge positive impact that way. We continue to, in a number of situations, have challenges around blue cards—that is, family members who it is agreed by our staff doing the assessments are the best option for children. Often they are being placed with grandparents, for example, but there are hold-ups with blue cards, so not even just receiving a negative notice but certainly the lengthy process. We were dealing with one, as I was saying yesterday, that came down to the wire when I was filling out my form to attend here today. That was really quite critical in that the application had sat there for months and months and it absolutely came down to the wire yesterday. We had to ring every contact we had in the blue card organisation to prevent children being removed from their grandparents, which should never happen, but it does with the current system. We should never have been in that situation. If there was a different assessment process, that absolutely would not have occurred.

In principle, PICC absolutely supports the objectives of the bill. We agree that the current blue card system and its one-size-fits-all approach contains significant limitations for people on Palm Island and obviously in other communities. I have spoken with members of the justice group about that, so PICC also auspices the justice groups. I have a close relationship with the community justice group on Palm Island. It is a large responsibility and a lot of risk for the group, particularly if they were to remain in their current form. Often they are small groups of five to 10 people. The membership of the Palm Island group is, I think, 10 members. Not everyone is always active in that though, so we are often looking at a handful of people who are volunteers and who have obviously other jobs and other family and community obligations. I guess the suggestion would be around providing some added support to the existing justice groups to play the role in the proposed bill.

Our belief is also that consideration should be on a case-by-case basis that is made by a community-based decision-making group and that the state government should undertake a significant community-level consultation with Aboriginal communities as well to make sure the right decision-making mechanisms are in process. They are basically some comments from the organisation that I am representing here today. As I said, over the years I have certainly seen the impact that the current system is having and know that there are many examples where any reasonable person, knowing some of the scenarios, would not decline a blue card where we have seen where that has occurred. Again, the issue around historical charges for people is a huge issue.

CHAIR: Narelle, just before I hand over to the deputy chair, the document that you are reading from: are you happy to provide that to the committee at the end?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes, absolutely.

CHAIR: The formality is that we have to agree to take it, and I am sure the committee will agree.

Mrs GERBER: I am going to hand over to the member for Scenic Rim. He has a question.

Mr KRAUSE: Thanks for your opening statement. I think you touched on the issue of government contracts and tender requirements and that all positions need to have blue cards regardless of the nature of the role.

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes.

Mr KRAUSE: Is it your opinion that some of these requirements are too stringent and it is ruling people out unnecessarily?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes. Certainly through some contacts, even through those who work within Blue Card Services, we have had some conversations around the fact that particularly some organisations in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities almost even oversubscribe to needing to get a blue card when, really, you need a blue card if you are going to be doing child related employment. We have been advised, for example, that staff working at our women's shelter, which is a crisis accommodation for women, technically should not require a blue card because they are not doing child related employment, but I guess historically people have felt compelled that those sorts of positions have needed that. I think there is a couple of issues where people often feel that a job requires a blue card when actually it does not.

Mr KRAUSE: It is going above and beyond?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: That is right, but this was specifically a contract with the Department of Education that I am talking about around one of our services. It is quite a large service. It is a great big facility that was built for the community and it actually does accommodate a number of our programs including early childhood services, NDIS services, domestic and family violence services, just to name a few, so everyone who works in or out of that service requires a blue card. Like I said, that means the transport drivers, the cleaning staff and the receptionist whereas next door we manage the health service and that is not required.

Mr KRAUSE: So it is obviously that anyone who might have incidental contact with children in any form is being required, but in everyday life that can happen as well—

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes, that is right.

Mr KRAUSE:—outside in any setting, so thank you for that. The second part I wanted to ask about was with regard to grandparents and kinship care. You indicated that obviously there is a need for blue cards for that kinship care arrangement to continue?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes.

Mr KRAUSE: How many times, if you can say, have you seen children removed from that kinship care arrangement due to blue card issues and in particular delays or just non-responsiveness from the department?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: In terms of how the process works—so that scenario happened yesterday where potentially children were removed, and that was even in an email that a decision was needing to be made yesterday whether children would remain there or be removed from that family home. Generally, though, what would happen is children would not even get to be placed there. How the assessments for foster and kinship placements work is that the forms are done and filled out, including an initial assessment, and the department of child safety do their initial child criminal history screening in the background. If some initial concerns come up through that, we will still apply for a blue card, but if there are issues with that children will not even be placed there. It is not that they are necessarily removed; they are not even placed. What happens, though—again, we have certainly had a couple of scenarios where this has happened—is that here on Palm Island there might be a couple of potential family households where children may be placed but there may be blue card issues in either of those, because all of the adult household members need blue cards. It is not just the aunty who is going to be the primary carer who is assessed; everyone else who lives in my household—every adult member—needs a blue card, so it only takes one person in that household not to be able to obtain a blue card and then that placement is not even considered. The risk then is: if we cannot find a family placement for the kids here they are sent to Townsville, so children are removed not just from the family but from the whole community, and that certainly has happened, yes.

Mr KRAUSE: Delays or decisions not being made positively due to—

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Whatever that history might be, yes.

CHAIR: In relation to every person in the household having to have a blue card, the community would know whether that family were suitable for the children to be there with or without blue card?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes. It is local Palm Island staff that are doing the assessment on the family in the first place. We have kids that require a family placement—they are not able to live with parents for whatever reason—so the staff identify a family member. Our staff have already said—their argument is: 'We wouldn't even start filling out the forms to do an assessment if we thought this was not going to be an appropriate placement.' Their first and foremost concern is the children. They have a reputation in the community. They are not going to recommend someone and then people come back and say, 'What's happened here?'

The other point on that is: we have said for a very long time, even prior to operating this service—we have operated a safe house for children in out-of-home care for 12 years on Palm—that it is not putting a lot of trust in the carer you are assessing. It is the same as any of us. We do not require anyone who comes to stay at our house to have a blue card. Do you know what I mean? If you are assessing me as the carer, if I can pass the assessment—whatever you say I need to do—then it should be up to me and my judgement and decision-making who I allow to live in the house. Trust me to do that.

Mrs GERBER: We have talked about community justice groups in the context of the bill fulfilling that role or solving that problem, and you talked about community justice groups needing some more resources in order to do that. In the context of kinship care, in the context of fixing that issue, what kinds of resources, in your opinion, would the community justice groups need to be able to be the solution to that problem?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Obviously with respect to community justice group members who are here today, I have certainly spoken with people about that. I know the time commitment just in itself can be quite challenging. If it is an added role, which I think is a significant role for community justice groups, I think there needs to be an acknowledgement around the time, the remuneration and possibly just even the support around the knowledge that is around the system.

Mrs GERBER: Some financial funding and some support?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes. Like I said, our justice group has one paid employee: the coordinator of the justice group. That is how it is currently funded through the department of justice. The actual justice group members outside of that are generally volunteers. There is a bit of a roster system around members attending court. Members are paid to attend there, to acknowledge their time and contribution, but I am not aware if all justice groups operate that way. Ours does.

Mrs GERBER: It might be hard to say in a vacuum, whilst this is all still speculative, but how many more paid roles do you think the community justice group might need in order to fulfil the demand in the kinship carer space?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: I would think at least two or three. It is quite significant.

Ms BOLTON: Obviously your organisation has had hands-on experience assisting a number of people with their applications. Would you be able to roughly estimate how many of those applications where the time that it took was the issue versus the serious offence considered was rejected?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: I guess it is a bit of everything. In the first instance when people apply, often when people get the initial letter from Blue Card saying, 'We require a submission from you'—the language I think is an issue for a start. The process is quite daunting. I often think—I know—that is a turn-off for people straightaway. People do not even go down that track because sometimes people are not sure or they interpret it that, 'They have already said no. I can't get one,' because people know if they have a history or not. We often talk to people about, 'If you're eligible to apply, how about we apply and we see what comes back and we can assist if they require further information?'

If people do not have that support, what we often find is that sometimes people get a letter and then they just forget it, do not want to bother. When we have assisted people to do that, because often it is just providing some contextual information to that, that is done, but sometimes that can take months. We have had a situation where it has taken well over a year. Someone has had a renewal and they have had a change in police information and that has considerably held it up, I would say, at least a year if not more. It was just pending, pending, pending—no explanation why.

Then I guess we obviously have had the scenario where people have just straightaway obviously got a negative notice. To be honest, that has probably been more than a handful of times—it may have been five or 10 people who over the years I have had contact with who have received a negative notice or they are a disqualified person or whatever the language is.

Ms BOLTON: Out of those, in how many do you believe the justice group would have said, 'No, they should be eligible'?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Knowing the nature of the person, I would like to believe that probably all of them would have got through, but I do know that at least one had a historical sexual offence which I know would not be able to even be considered. But certainly knowing who the people are and how they interact in other roles they have in community, I would think on face value those people would have been considered to obtain a positive blue card if it was not through the current process.

Ms BOLTON: Within the process, when you have assisted someone, has the community justice group ever provided, say, a reference and a recommendation to add to that submission or response?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes.

Ms BOLTON: When the response comes back from the commission, do they clearly give their rationale as to why they disagree with the justice group?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: No, it is not generally, from what I have seen, that detailed. If someone comes to us—for example, a potential employee—and they have received that letter back asking for further information, certainly we talk with people about options about getting references, and the justice group absolutely is one of the first places that we will recommend or that people have already thought of themselves. Often people will say, 'I've already been to the justice group and asked them for a reference.'

Ms BOLTON: And there has been success there?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes.

Mr KATTER: One of the criticisms of the bill is that it compromises the safety of the children by giving that decision-making process to the local justice group. Would you be prepared to express your view on that? Acknowledging that there is no perfect system, do you think there is any significant shift in risk level?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: No, absolutely not. I think it is overly risk-averse at the moment.

Mr KATTER: Do you think there are occasions where it could even be a tighter system, where you have that local input whereby if there are things not flagged in the blue card system locals can say, 'Well, we know that person. There is no way.' There could be an input at that level?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes, absolutely. That is right. Community justice groups and communities have high standards around what roles people should play around the safety of children. It is a bit similar to how our local staff use their local knowledge for our kinship assessments. Straightaway it is, 'We will do an assessment on this one.' We have in some instances, absolutely, raised issues because we need to include that in our assessment. We may continue with an assessment if we think it will be a good placement, but 'this is also something that needs to be considered and we need to put a risk plan around that'. There is not always just a straight yes or no answer. Absolutely I have talked about that with someone. We are not saying here that if it was to be assessed by the justice group that is going to be an easy yes for everyone, because I absolutely believe that it is not either. I guess we need to consider what I am talking about—the supports around the conflict of interest, because it can be very difficult, I guess, in small communities if you have members of the justice group, and having some clear mechanisms in place around who is making the decisions and the relationships to perhaps not just the person but also their offence, whether it is a historical or recent offence. Again, safeguards can be put in place for that. I absolutely do not think it would compromise the safety of children.

Ms BUSH: You made a comment about young people who are transitioning from care struggling to get blue cards. Did I hear that right, that there is a struggle there?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: We often have young people who have been in care, particularly residential care, who are from Palm Island but they have been living in Townsville for a number of years and then move back to Palm Island. Unfortunately what happens for a number of kids in care, particularly in residentials, is sometimes if kids get into fights or arguments or damage property they are already racking up a criminal history and so straightaway that is preventing someone from a very young age, 18 or 19, if they are looking for employment, from obtaining a blue card, purely by the nature of their circumstances often.

Ms BUSH: Explain that to me, if that is okay. Our reading of the current act is that a lot of the disqualifying offences are sexual offences and violence offences. If a young person in a resi is smashing up the resi and is being charged for wilful damage, that should not prohibit them. Explain to me what is happening.

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: I guess it shouldn't, but sometimes it does.

Ms BUSH: How?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: I guess it is a bit similar to the scenario where they may not be provided with a negative notice, and often we find that that is not the case. Unless you are registered as a disqualified person, or whatever the language is, then often you are not provided with a negative notice straightaway, unless it is a very serious offence. But it is that issue that if people apply they often get the letter back saying, 'We need more information.'

Ms BUSH: 'We need more context,' and then that becomes a barrier.

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes: 'We need more information.' Often if people are young, they are not as resourceful and they do not know. People often get it and think that is already saying no. It is also the situation—and this goes for young people and adults over the years—that people sometimes just think if they have any criminal history they are not going to get a blue card, so it is going into it already with that thought.

Ms BUSH: We have heard that come up. Thank you. That clarifies that. Going back to the question from the member for Scenic Rim about contracts and tenders often requiring blue cards, specifically on Palm Island who are the organisations? Is it the schools or is it the council? Which organisations are requiring that for working in an area where they are not having direct contact with kids?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Our organisation has to comply with it. The requirements for that are written into our service agreement. We have a children and family centre that is funded on Palm Island. It is because of the nature of the name—children and family centre—but those buildings were built and funded by the Australian government, administered through the Department of Education in Queensland. It was different for each state and territory. That specific facility was always meant to be a multipurpose asset for the community. While they are called children and family centres, there was always the understanding and the expectation that they would be used for other programs and other purposes. It could be for a men's group. It could be for yarning, and we do use it for that—women's yarning circles at night—those sorts of things. It is the actual contract we have as an organisation with our funding body, the Department of Education, that says everyone must have—

Ms BUSH: All positions and all contracts.

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes—everyone must have it.

Ms BUSH: Thank you. That is great.

Mr KRAUSE: We were speaking before—and it was touched on obliquely—about people not getting blue cards and that they need to make submissions essentially about character issues. You have obviously experienced and seen cases where people are not getting blue cards, not because they have a disqualifying offence like a sexual offence or an offence against a child but because of other things like a broader criminal history—

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Generally assault charges.

Mr KRAUSE: It seems to me, in thinking about that, that for the people who have that broader criminal history it is like an extra layer of punishment almost for things that have gone on in the past. Can you give me your thoughts about that generally?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Absolutely it is. A lot of people will get the letter and attached in the letter will be a list of people's criminal history. Often people are very generous in sharing that information with me or with whomever it is who may be assisting them to provide a response. Often I can see from that that sometimes for some people it started when they were children and teenagers and continued. It is a whole range of offences.

Mr KRAUSE: Basically you have to go through and explain all of that again.

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes. What Blue Card Services want to hear is some context around that. They basically want to hear you say—and they have almost told me this: 'I acknowledge the criminal history that I have. At that particular time I was experiencing this, or this was the scenario.' Sometimes people are homeless when these things are happening or they have had a significant event or trauma—all sorts of things. That is really what they want to hear. They want to hear your explanation and that that is not the case now. That is very difficult for people to have that analysis of their own history. Not many people can do that.

Mr KRAUSE: Do you ever feel as though blue cards are about covering or ensuring that the department is not embarrassed rather than actually being constructive in doing what it is supposed to do in the community? That is a very open-ended question, I know.

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes, it is. The 'department' as in?

Mr KRAUSE: The blue card section—the government.

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: I feel that they are just being overly risk averse. That is right. If they were to grant someone a blue card, they would not want something to happen that would come back on them. That would be an embarrassment in that sense, absolutely.

CHAIR: That is the end of this session. Thank you, Narelle, for coming along.

Mrs GERBER: Are you happy for us to table that?

Ms Gleeson-Henaway: Yes.

Mrs GERBER: I move that that be tabled as part of the committee process.

CHAIR: There being no objection, it is so tabled.

CANNON, Ms Iris, Palm Island Community Justice Group

CONWAY, Ms Margaret, Palm Island Community Justice Group

GORRINGE, Mrs Ruth, Palm Island Community Justice Group

CHAIR: I welcome the following representatives from the Palm Island Community Justice Group: Ruth Gorringer, Margaret Conway and Iris Cannon. One of you or all of you can make an opening statement. You do not have to make an opening statement if you do not want to, but you are more than welcome.

Mrs Gorringer: On behalf of the Palm Island Community Justice Group, we would like to thank the committee for coming to Palm Island. Thank you also to Robbie Katter. Welcome to Manbarra-Bwgcolman land. I would like to acknowledge our elders past and present and our up and coming leaders in our community.

Some of the questions that Narelle put forward are questions that we have also been fighting as community members. We would like to see changes in getting the blue card. I did not come with questions written down, but I am saying this off the top of my head.

CHAIR: That is okay.

Mrs Gorringer: I am also a community member. I also work with the PCYC. I am also a grandmother and a mother. I thank you all for this opportunity that you have given us today.

One of the things that I would like to raise is what a few young people in our community have raised with me. They have gotten in trouble—for example, when they were 13 years old, 12 years old or 10 years old—for breaking and entering and all of those things. I explained to them that they would be disqualified from getting a blue card if they had been convicted of sexual assault or were a convicted paedophile. They are the reasons—or a serious offence of assault.

Speaking of assault, one of the questions that I would like to ask is: is assault when you argue with someone? Just say someone in the community argued with me and that individual was charged with assault—they argued with me but they did not use their hands or any weapons—but down the track as a 35-year-old person that person had changed and decided, 'I think I am a better person. I think I would be able to work with children. I have children of my own and I would like to apply to work or volunteer with the PCYC or volunteer to do some work in the school doing cultural work,' but because of that earlier offence that person cannot get a blue card and enter schools or areas where children are. I would like an explanation about that as well.

There was one young person who came to us recently—she was here earlier—who had a blue card but was finding it difficult to get another blue card. She is a young mother. I told her to come back and see us later and I can explain things to her then. I do not know if it was financial or something in the system that just got lost.

CHAIR: Ruth, has she left?

Mrs Gorringer: She has left. She was here with a young child.

CHAIR: Yes, I saw her.

Mrs Gorringer: She asked me to ask that question on her behalf. I have an email address for Kathryn—thank you, Kathryn—so we can ask more questions later on that were not asked today and you can all have a look at it.

CHAIR: Did the young lady have trouble getting a blue card?

Mrs Gorringer: Yes. She had a blue card and she is trying to apply for another blue card. That also happened with me. I will explain why. I used to work with the Education Queensland for over 20 years. Then I stopped working because other things came up but I was also doing studies. Every time I tried to apply for my blue card I had my number but it just got lost in the system. In 2000 when I started working in PICC as a youth worker, picking up the kids up taking them home, that is when it finally came because I could not get work without it. I just do not know. Maybe my name got mixed up because I married. When I was working back then my maiden name was different to my married name.

CHAIR: Do you have a blue card now, Ruth?

Mrs Gorringer: I do have a blue card because I am working with PCYC. I had it when I was working back then in 2000. In 1993 I had it because I was working in Education Queensland. We know the circumstances. For instance, someone probably needed to be marked out. If Palm Island were

given that opportunity through the PCYC, we could have a psychologist on board—someone who is trained to sit with us and work with the youth justice group, not only the young and old but the people who are willing to come forward and apply to be on the justice group. We had a nomination drive just recently for our justice group members. How many did we receive and how many were able to join?

Ms Conway: We had about 30.

Mrs Gorringe: We had 30 people apply. They had to have their police check, of course. Was anyone rejected, do you know?

Ms Conway: No. We are still waiting on that answer.

CHAIR: How long ago, Margaret, did they apply for the police check?

Ms Conway: Earlier this year or last year.

Mrs Gorringe: Last year—they are still waiting.

Ms Conway: We are still waiting.

CHAIR: So 30 people applied last year to be on the justice group and they still have not received a reply about their police check?

Ms Conway: No.

Mrs Gorringe: All 30 of them?

Ms Conway: Yes, all 30 of them. We are still waiting on the justice committee to get back to us as to whether they approved them. We are still waiting on answers.

CHAIR: Where did the applications go to? Did they go to the justice department? Do you know where they went to, Margaret?

Ms Conway: DJAG.

Mrs Gorringe: About 30 of them.

CHAIR: I know this might be a difficult question to ask, so bear with me. Do you know when last year they sent in their applications?

Ms Conway: We did a nomination drive. That was last year.

Mrs Gorringe: Was it in October?

Audience member: Yes. They expired in November. It was before that. September-October the applications went in.

CHAIR: Sorry to interrupt, Ruth.

Mrs Gorringe: If we do have the opportunity to make those decisions in the community here, we could look at how we can make it better. There would be more support for the justice group within Palm Island and in our other communities and towns to make that decision. The people on the justice group have to have a clear record, of course, and be known in the community. We have to know other people as well.

For instance, Narelle was speaking about a family member, a grandparent, who is caring for young people on the island. What happens is that every person in that household has to apply for their blue card. I know of one particular case here where this person is still waiting to apply for their blue card so the onus has to be put on the grandparent who has the knowledge and the understanding: 'I know that my niece hasn't applied for it, but if child safety find out then the children will have to be taken away and taken back to the child safety house here.' Sometimes there is no room here so then our children have to leave the island, be disconnected from their families, their culture, their way of living and life here. They need to be connected to their grandparents. I do not know if Margaret would like to speak.

Ms Conway: There is another thing with that sort of issue. When they take kids in, the whole family has to have a blue card. But then if some of the family drinks—members in the household—to get a blue card they need to stop drinking or they have to move out of their own home. If child safety asks them to take a child in, the mothers refuse because they would have to kick their own kids out to take in another child and then their kids are left homeless. We are trying to deal with that too.

CHAIR: Iris, did you want to say something?

Ms Cannon: I have worked in the school, along with Ruth. It is where I got my blue card. I still take my blue card to enter the school. I think it is school policy that you have to have that card and I proudly wear it. I am sad that there is a lot of people in our community who are disadvantaged because of that blue card. I work with two colleagues behind me, at Ferdy's Haven. After the 10 years I have Palm Island

been there, no-one seems to want a blue card because of the nature of their crime or being in prison. What is going to happen with those people who leave crime? You talked today about sexual assault. Those people will not be able to get that card and they are not allowed in our rehab too. But what about the ones with common charges who want to change their lives? How do we help them to get that blue card to start on a new journey with jobs or whatever, working with children if they want to still be around kids? There is a lot of people we visit in the prisons who cannot have access to that. They come back into our community but cannot get jobs because they do not have that blue card.

Ms Conway: They cannot get it if they have been in prison for years for domestic violence, for being violent. They come back to Palm and try to change their life. They try to look for a job but they cannot get it because of their criminal history.

Mrs Gorrige: I think with domestic violence, it is a serious offence—this is my opinion—you cannot get a blue card. Correct me if I am wrong: for our mob on Palm Island, what I hear from Auntie Iris and Margaret is that, while people come back to our community, we have to have people in place on our justice group committee who are here for our children. They are here to know that our children are safe and inform us that they are safe. I know that we will not be making decisions to say, 'Joe Blow can go and work here at the school because we know that person.' It has to be a serious decision. That is serious and we need to be trained in that area.

The justice group needs to have training to know that we cannot invite someone to go and get a blue card because they want the blue card; we have to know the legalities behind it. We have to also know that if this person committed this offence and we know they want to get back into the community, there are ways that they can find work elsewhere. Maybe they want to work with kids, but our children are our future and we have to keep our children safe. That is first and foremost. Our children need to be around people who will care for their interests, care for their wellbeing and also know that they feel safe. They feel safe in an environment where they know that they can trust an adult and that they will not be mistreated.

When you are looking at it and making these decisions, it is very serious. If that role is going to be put on the justice group, or whatever committee will make that decision, it has to be thought through. As I suggested, maybe someone who has training in psychology and someone who is from the police department need to be on that committee to make those decisions. It is not just a nitty-gritty thing where you can just hand it over to the justice group. We have to have training in areas. We have to be educated to know that once we make the decision it will not backfire on us. We cannot be put in a place where we are going to fail. We need that support not just for two years but on and on. When the next government comes in and when the next committee comes on board, we need something in place to say, 'We will support you. We're not going to put you there to let you fail.'

As a community member, for me this is very serious. We do not want it to be, 'We're just handing it to them and if they fail, they fail.' No. We need support from the government, from JAG and from PICC as well—because PICC is running through the justice group—and from our community, from our councillors and from our mayor. We all need to be supporting one another in this area. I know that we only have a few people here, but the saying goes: we support each other and we have the desire to have this bill put through on working with children in Indigenous communities, whether that be out in Charters Towers—I am just using this as an example—they need to be supported. Whether it is up in Ingham or whether it is up in Yarrabah or in any other community, there needs to be a commitment to supporting us. We need a commitment and not just to say, 'We'll leave the Palm Island justice group tread water.' We really need that support and it has to be ongoing support.

Mrs GERBER: Thanks, Ruth, Margaret and Iris. We will endeavour to provide you with some answers to your questions through the secretariat. The questions that you have asked get to the crux of the issue that we have heard not just from this session in Palm Island but also in Mount Isa. It is about the confusion and a lack of knowledge around what is a disqualifying offence and what is a serious offence that does not necessarily disqualify you from obtaining a blue card but the blue card system is requiring further information from those people and those people potentially are still entitled to a blue card. In my view, the bill is proposing to use community justice groups to bridge the time gap that is happening in the blue card system with serious offences. I am not talking about disqualifying offences, which involve child sex offenders; I am talking about serious offences, which could be arson or anything that is classified in the act as a serious offence. Those people could get a blue card. In terms of your community justice group being able to fill that void or solve that problem for your community, you have spoken about needing some education and some resources. I would like to hear from you specifically on that point. Can you expand on that? What would your community justice group need on Palm Island in order to be able to do the job of assessing for blue cards those people who are not disqualified persons but who just have a criminal history and you need to look at them to see whether or not they are capable of holding a blue card?

Mrs Gorringe: I do not know if Aunty Iris or Margaret would like to speak on this, but I believe that it is about going away from town, because we have to be out of the community to have training. If JAG could follow through or even through the Legal Affairs and Safety Committee, we need to have training away from town. It could be a week or three days. We need training on the nitty-gritty of knowing about the areas where we can give a person a blue card.

Ms Conway: Yes, the legal side of things. I think most of the elders really do not understand some of it. I keep asking all of the time if we could get some training on all of that for each and every one of us.

Mrs GERBER: Obviously there are the resources. Narelle talked about needing some more funded paid positions.

Mrs Gorringe: Yes.

Mrs GERBER: And then what about the checks and balances? What would the community justice group need in order for the public to have confidence that there are checks and balances? I guess one of the criticisms right now is that a community justice group could be susceptible to pressure from family or community groups to make a certain decision. I am not saying that is the case; I am just saying that is one of the criticisms that we have heard. In terms of there being checks and balances and public confidence in the system, what do you think could be done?

Mrs Gorringe: I think maybe send someone door to door on Palm Island and ask people questions: what do they see the justice group doing? How would they foresee the justice group being able to make these decisions? Another thing for me would be that people who come on board on the justice group need—

Ms Conway: I think the people from Myuma are coming soon to do a survey in the community about the justice group, about what we are doing, if we are doing a good job and all that and if they think that we need more help or anything.

Mrs Gorringe: I think for the people who come on board on the justice group, their slate will have to be clean. They have to be genuine. They have to be well known in the community. I will use myself as an example. I should not be out there breaking the law. Whoever comes into the justice group has to be a person who knows what is right and what is wrong and that they should not be doing the wrong things if they are on the justice group. We are here to help. It is for our young people. If you are looking at the bill, it is about working with children in Indigenous communities. It is about our children. Say a person from the mainland has seen on Instagram that Palm is a beautiful island and they have seen all these photos on Facebook so they have decided to come to Palm to live, but we do not know their background. If they get checked and something is wrong, 'Sorry, mate; you cannot be working with our kids. We do not want you here.' We want what is right for our children. We want people to be looking after our kids in the right way.

CHAIR: I am just conscious of the time. I do not want to cut you off.

Ms Conway: No, that is fine.

CHAIR: I will go to the member for Noosa. Can I ask the committee to try and limit the preamble to your questions and just get to the question?

Ms Cannon: Can I just stress something here?

CHAIR: Yes, of course.

Ms Cannon: With the blue card, it is a disadvantage for our mob as well. We had a young mum who had to give her daughter away to my daughter. It is still in the family, but that mum was left traumatised. The disconnection took place. The child was distressed too. I rang my daughter up, 'You've got to cuddle it, love it, feel it and whatnot to that baby, but that mother is traumatised as well.' She went back onto the streets. Who helped her? We had a few cases like that in rehab and the mother tried really hard. How do blue cards help them? They go on to other drugs. We label them. We really label them, but behind that we have to support them as well. I think that is a disadvantage that a lot of our young mums have here.

My niece took advantage of it. No-one can come here because we've got a baby from child safety. That is a good thing, but what about that traumatised mum? Who helps her? I try to be there for her and explain to her. We had a case at rehab where this mother came in, and she was really trying her heart out but had no way to get the children back because the system already labelled her because she used that other drug and was a bad mum because of that. We tried to work with her really hard at rehab. She changed. She limited her use, and she left at a good note but disconnected from the children because of that blue card. Sometimes it does disadvantage a lot of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and I have witnessed it.

Ms BOLTON: We have heard over the last couple of days here and in Mount Isa that the main issue seems to be not only the time it is taking but the lack of information, knowledge and education around the blue card system but also the inability to respond to requests for more information. As we heard from Narelle, when there is assistance given by an organisation you can then get a positive outcome. Would you see that it would be of great assistance if, for example, Narelle and her team were funded to provide that service for everyone who is applying for a blue card with the input when needed from the community justice group as a reference? Would you see that as a positive?

Mrs Gorringe: Yes, I see that as a positive. I know very well that the justice group is already doing that as well. Margaret can speak on that. People go to get their identification printed out and then sent away and signed by a JP.

Ms BOLTON: That is fine. Yes, that would be a really good resolution because I realise we are short on time.

CHAIR: Margaret, would you like to add something to that?

Ms Conway: Yes, we just help them fill out forms and send them, take them to the networking through Campbell Page. Sorry, but sometimes we are getting mixed up and we are not answering the questions for you because we were unprepared. Sorry.

CHAIR: I do not think that is an issue, Ruth, Margaret or Iris. You are answering our questions. It is not a test, Margaret: it is information gathering.

Mrs Gorringe: I think they do it really well, it is just that we share it because a lot of our people have been coming to us to get their ID printed. We sign off with the JP and send it away for their blue card.

Mr KATTER: I will ask a similar question as before. One of the big criticisms made is that handing decision-making back to the local justice group can compromise the safety of a child. Are you confident that you have the maturity and the ability to make decisions that will keep children safe according to your standards here?

Mrs Gorringe: Yes, I think so. I would just like to stipulate, as I said earlier, that people who get onto the justice group have to have a clean slate because Margaret, Iris, other members and I maybe will not be here in another 10 years time, so we have to make sure that this is followed through and that support is given to us. Not only that, we also encourage our young people to step up as well. It is not just for older people; it is for our young people as well.

Mr KATTER: Do you think there is an argument that children's safety could actually be worse off under the current system, given that the best pathway for getting people off the grog or drugs is getting a job, and if it is stopping them getting a job now, more grog and drugs is worse for the kids? Could you say there is an argument there that—

Ms Conway: Yes, there is. Because of the lack of jobs they get bored, and if they have no employment they do not know how to help their family. I know that fathers feel obligated, but how can they be obligated when they cannot get a job to feed their family? Because they are the head of the family and they are supposed to keep their family, but they have no job and they need that blue card to help them to get a job. These days when you apply for a job you have to have a blue card. If they cannot get a blue card then what are they supposed to do?

Ms BUSH: Ruth, I do not have a lot of time and I have a couple of questions. What that means is if I feel you have answered the question, am I okay to cut you off? Would you mind if I do that so I can get through them?

Mrs Gorringe: Yes, I do not mind, Jonty.

Ms BUSH: Do not take that the wrong way. The first question is about the community justice group. What kind of decisions do you as a community justice group make now?

Mrs Gorringe: I think the decisions we make are when people come in and there are disputes in the community, families come in and we sit down and Iris and the other members sit and support them to come to an agreement where they need that support to work things through. I sat in one with two young people. They were having fights in the community. Their mothers came in to ask us if they could come and sit down quickly. We had to listen to both sides and we spoke to them about how they can work it out because they have to be living in the same community. They are not going to be moving away. They ended up apologising and it was not taken to the court. It was worked out there.

Ms BUSH: That is like a restorative conference, victim conference.

Ms Conway: Yes, sometimes when they go to courts over arguments they bring it back to the justice group and they want us to do a mediation.

Ms BUSH: Given that there are 43 language groups and different people here, are there ever conflicts or issues that you have to work through as a community? I am sure there are.

Ms Conway: Yes, we work with the police. Sometimes the police will ask us about some clients that go to court and whether we approve or whether they need help or some other thing to deal with it. Denise is the coordinator and she sits with the sergeant. She will talk it out with them and then she will bring it back to the justice group members. Then we all discuss it there and then we do a resolution, then we will send it back to the police.

Ms BUSH: So you have a framework for working that sort of thing out?

Ms Conway: Yes.

Ms BUSH: I have some questions quickly about DJAG and Blue Card Services as an organisation. They have developed a strategy and action plan. They co-designed that with Aboriginal communities. Were you involved in that process at all? Were you aware of that process happening here?

Ms Conway: Not that I know of.

Mrs Gorringe: No, we were not involved in that.

Ms BUSH: Blue Card Services also stated that they are working with Aboriginal communities to smooth out the application and appeals process.

Ms Conway: Yes.

Ms BUSH: Have they been doing that with you? Were you aware of that?

Ms Conway: They have a stakeholder meeting, I think. They come over and with every stakeholder on this island they discuss it and inform us about people from blue card coming over to fill out forms and things.

Mrs Gorringe: Blue card applications. They usually have it in the community and we let the community know. So they come in and fill out the forms and get their ID sent away and it is taken—

Ms Conway: Yes, we can help them fill all the forms out and they take it with them to process it.

Ms BUSH: How often do they do that?

Ms Conway: They only just came.

Mrs Gorringe: They just came reasonably—

Ms Cannon: Last month or a fortnight, I think.

Ms BUSH: Do you remember when before that?

Ms Conway: A year, I think.

Ms Gleeson: I guess it depends. They have not been coming as regularly, but it is probably once a year maybe blue card comes over for a couple of days and people can see them (inaudible).

Ms BUSH: Are they coming from Townsville? Where are they coming from?

Mrs Gorringe: Brisbane.

Ms Conway: Brisbane.

Ms BUSH: When they go back to Brisbane can you pick up the phone and ring that same person and work through issues with them, or do you have to go through the 13 number?

Ms Conway: I am not sure.

Mrs Gorringe: I do not know. We do not ring them up.

Ms BUSH: That is okay. That is really helpful. Thank you so much. We got through our questions. Well done, Ruth.

Ms Conway: They say they will get back to us, but they do not.

CHAIR: We have about 10 minutes. I just want to clear something up. I am not sure whether it is a misunderstanding or not. The committee itself is gathering evidence. Then we do a report and we give the report to the government. At some point we table the report in parliament and then the government responds to our report, but then the bill has to be debated in the House. We are not quite there yet. I do not want the community to think that by us coming here it is going to happen.

Mrs Gorrige: I think we will have to send out notices through the justice group and council, even just to put it in the *Palm Island Voice* or on the radio.

CHAIR: As the process unfolds we will make sure that we get the information to the community, whether we get it through the mayor and the deputy mayor. We have all of your contacts so we will be able to distribute it far and wide.

Mrs GERBER: I just want to go back to the question I talked about around your community justice group being able to solve the problem of the time it is taking for Blue Card Services to assess people who might have a criminal history. The bill proposes a mechanism whereby the community justice group would meet and make a binding recommendation. That would go to Blue Card Services, essentially. It is called the chief executive, but it would go to Blue Card Services, essentially. The bill proposes that that would expedite the time. In terms of the community justice group being able to meet in order to fulfil that obligation, could you convene and meet whenever you needed? How often do you meet? Can you talk me through that process?

Ms Conway: We usually meet every second month or something like that, but if we need to have a meeting we call it. We could call it to discuss that and make a decision.

Mrs GERBER: You could meet quickly if you needed to?

Ms Conway: Yes.

Mrs GERBER: Could you meet if you needed to quickly; say, if you had someone in the community come to you and say 'I know that I've got a criminal history. I'm applying for a blue card. I'm going to need the community justice group to make a binding recommendation.'?

Mrs Gorrige: What happens is the community does not have to meet in that way, they just go to the office and talk to Margaret or Denise and she will fill out the forms to send away. It really does not have to meet every time someone comes to apply for a blue card, but we will have a meeting if there needs to be something—

Mrs GERBER: Consideration of the issues?

Mrs Gorrige: Yes.

Ms Conway: If it is very serious they need to meet. Just about that meeting, sometimes it is very hard for us to have a meeting because most of them are away and there are a couple of them on dialysis, the members. Sometimes we only get two or three.

Mrs GERBER: You could have a quorum situation to resolve that. This committee has a subcommittee. If two of us are away we can call a committee meeting with three members to make a decision. You could have some kind of a mechanism like that. Do you think that would solve that?

Ms Cannon: Yes, I think so. They had a member drive to the justice group and it was really hard because of the blue card again. It is just an uphill battle, isn't, Margaret?

TURNER, Ms Marion, Private capacity

Ms Turner: I am here as a workforce member and as a community member. Something I have come across regarding the blue card system is typically a Palm Island family, the members of that family, will have about three or four different surnames. That itself creates some confusion when applying for it. We may know an individual with a certain surname. He goes to get his birth certificate and he has a totally different name. Therein begins a long process through the blue card system.

Ms BUSH: That would not just be unique to blue card, is that also with drivers' licences and different things like that?

Ms Turner: I just know of blue card instances. Their licence, their Medicare card, all other IDs are in the name that we know them as. They could have a completely different legal name. That would create some confusion, and it has. Having a local authority I guess would alleviate a lot of that stress and frustration.

CHAIR: Because they would know that person.

Ms Turner: Exactly, they have known them for years. They have grown up here. But that is just the way things are with our people, with the different names and that. That is all I wanted to bring up.

Ms BUSH: That is a really good point. I am glad that you said that.

CHAIR: Thank you all for coming along. Thank you for giving your evidence here today. We will close this session and we will now welcome the mayor of Palm Island and the deputy mayor.

HAINES, Mr Derek, Deputy Mayor, Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council

SAM, Mr Mislam, Mayor, Palm Island Aboriginal Shire Council

CHAIR: Good afternoon. You have been watching the process. If you want to make an opening statement, you are more than welcome. After that the committee will have some questions for you.

Mr Sam: Thank you. It has been interesting listening right across the board. I think one thing I will say from the get-go is this community needs a brave state government. Our welfare snowball continues to grow by the day. I believe it is time to change this bill. I can tell you now simple facts and figures. There is 80 per cent unemployment right across the board on Palm Island. Narelle told you about the stats for the Palm Island Community Co. Ltd. Well, in 10 years that is probably going to be about 300 employees delivering social services on Palm. Local employment will go down unless immediate changes are not made. Every year we have 50 funerals. There are probably two weeks in the calendar year where we do not have a funeral on the island. I have one of the busiest cemeteries and busiest airports. Do you see the correlation?

All the people are flying in and out of my community because they cannot hold down simple local jobs because they cannot access a blue card. That is just being straight up. That welfare bill is going to rise. I have asked all different levels of government, both Commonwealth and state, to give me an actual dollar figure of how much is spent in this community. Two, three weeks ago, we had about five helicopters come in and evacuate people out at \$10,000 a pop. Simple figures. That taxpayer bill is going to go up unless a significant change is not made to the blue card arrangements. I can tell you now that there are a lot of jobs. There is 80 per cent unemployment, but there are a lot of jobs. No-one can fill these roles. The Police Service has been looking for PLOs for the last two years—\$65,000 a year, four positions, cannot fill them. The education department is crying out for local staff as teacher aides. They cannot fill them. Selectability is crying out for local staff. They cannot fill those positions because they cannot find people with a blue card or a yellow card—simple little things.

I will put it to you this way: this is our community. We grow up here all our life. Our brothers, sisters, cousins, friends, family all grow up here. Can you imagine how you would be in your own communities if you never left—I am pretty sure where you represent now you did not grow up there all your life. Your brothers and sisters are not around the corner, your cousins are not around the corner and all that. This is the actual experience of Palm. You can see where things can go wrong. We all go through trials and tribulations throughout our life. Yes, we are dumb when we are younger, you know. We turn that around later on in life. We all go through those things. I do not have to tell you about any of that.

Getting back to simple figures, the welfare bill is going to go up. The unemployment stat is going to go up for local employers. Who is going to fix the bill? A simple change would be a simple bill passed by the state government and maybe a young kid enrolled in Bwgcolman or St Michael's today may have an opportunity in life. One thing I learned during the COVID years back in 2020 when we were under a three-month lockdown is that this community was peaceful. It was great. I attribute that to only one fact: the federal government gave people double the Centrelink payment—a bit of wealth. For the first time in their life they have got double. They had food in the fridge for the first time.

There are a lot of jobs on Palm; remember what I said. There are a lot of jobs on Palm unfulfilled by local employment. There was a three-month lockdown right across the nation. How many divorces went through? How many domestic violence cases went through right across the nation? Palm Island was the opposite. Everything went down. The extra dollars received through Centrelink created that wealth, created opportunity and you could probably say it was like holding down a regular job. That is the problem we have locally in community: filling roles. Our old people who suffered under a regime, if they were given what we have today we would be self-sustainable right across board. We would have all our local doctors, local nurses and local teachers without a doubt. They were the smartest and wisest people because they went through the hard times of Palm Island from 1980 all the way back to 1970. Now I am asking you to be brave. To hold a position as an elected leader in a community—and, I think, Sandy, you were a former local government councillor or mayor?

Ms BOLTON: Councillor.

Mr Sam: Every day we are pulled up on the street. We are in as close contact with the people as possible. We know exactly. Like I said earlier, we have cousins, brothers and sisters all living locally. Who better to make a determination on who is qualified for a role than our local community? They know us from their first baby step to our current walking step. Right across the board. Who is in a better position, someone sitting in Brisbane or someone locally who is going to go through the whole process of sitting on a community justice group? Do you know what, they feel more when it comes to pride and Palm Island

the possibility and opportunity in this community than anyone else in this country—than anyone else in the world. They know exactly the repercussions of someone not getting a job because they might have strayed in life when they were younger. We have all done it. I have been there. My councillor to the left here is probably in the same predicament. Like I said, I have two statements: I have the world's busiest airport and the world's busiest cemetery. That is all.

CHAIR: Derek, do you want to add anything?

Mr Haines: Just getting back to the blue card, just an idea for government: conditions with blue cards. If we can somehow condition it to a certain specific individual, on past events or current events, so we can break it down and at least give the justice group members responsibility to say we can trust him working here or there. That is just an idea. If you can maybe write that one down, please. That is all.

Mrs GERBER: Thank you for your presentation and thank you for your opening statement. I bristled a bit when you said we have not grown up in our community, because I have. My sister lives around the corner, my mum lives down the street, my grandmother lives up the hill. My question for you is around your experience with the blue card system. What we have heard from this forum and in Mount Isa is that it is the delays that are impacting people as well as perhaps the consideration that is going on. Can you talk us through your experience of the blue card system and the delays that you have noticed within the community?

Mr Sam: From a personal account I suppose there have not been many. Most people locally will not even bother applying for a job because they already know from their family and their friends that they know who have been—

Mrs GERBER: They think they will not get approved?

Mr Sam: Yes, not approved. Why should they waste their time in life in applying for a process when they already know their brother, their sister, their cousin, and about 50 of their other family members have already been declined for whatever reason—some small criminal offences and all that sort of thing. We have to be straight to the point.

Most other communities do not have an alcohol management plan. The only thing that that has done is create further criminals in our community because of certain things. I made a statement earlier in regard to the three-month lockdown during COVID times where we saw nationally high rates of domestic violence because people did not have a job to go to, they stayed at home and all that sort of thing, but I can tell you now it was definitely the opposite for my community. Again, I can only attribute it to two things: a bit of wealth in their household and time to spend with families, which they already do. That is why I said welcome to Palm Island's world. Most people around this nation experience the everyday life of about 80 per cent of the families here on Palm. How do we change that? How do we create opportunity?

Another stat is that there are probably 100 or so kids who start year 7. We have the high school on Palm. Come year 12 and about 10 kids will graduate. There is about a 90 per cent dropout rate. Why should they aspire to be somebody or do anything when they know there is going to be bugga-all opportunities into the future because simple legislation prevents them from getting ahead.

Mrs GERBER: Just going back to that statement that you made before that people do not even apply because their brothers got rejected, their cousins got rejected and they do not think they are going to get it anyway, do you think the community justice groups would be able to fix that problem, because that is one of the solutions the bill is proposing?

Mr Sam: As I said earlier, who has more knowledge of our community than the people who have watched us grow up? One of the justice group members, Aunty Marg there, she saw me go to St Michael's. She was working there as a teacher aide. She would probably have a better opinion with regard to what type of person I am than someone sitting down in Brisbane in an office who is totally out of touch with this community. You probably asked them a question earlier with regard to how responsive they would be with regard to setting up an arrangement. I can tell you what: there are probably 20 kays of road here on Palm Island. It would not be that hard to get together to set up a quorum to make a decision—no traffic lights.

Mrs GERBER: Thanks, Mr Mayor.

Ms BOLTON: Mayor, I will not repeat the question that I put to Ruth earlier, but basically if the time frame lessened, if there was assistance given to those who are applying as they do through the Palm Island Community Co. Ltd and with references given from the community justice group, would that lessen the issue?

Mr Sam: Would you just repeat that question? I had a problem hearing that.

Ms BOLTON: Under the current system if the time frame was lessened, if the issues around knowledge as in applicants were assisted with that through, as Narelle does, the community company and then reference was given to that process of the submission from community justice, do you believe that would address this current situation?

Mr Sam: Most definitely.

Ms BOLTON: Thank you.

Mr KATTER: Going back to what the member for Noosa said, just to be clear, you would not see that as the sum total of a solution; you are just saying that that would assist? That would not solve the problem of what you have identified?

Mr Sam: I think right across the board, Robbie, it is just about that we need a brave state and Commonwealth government to actually invest where there is definitely an opportunity to save costs into the future. We cannot undervalue an opportunity to get a job locally in our communities.

Mr KATTER: Yes. Despite whatever references you have, my direct discussions with blue card before has said, 'If it's a fifty-fifty decision and you're sitting in Brisbane and you don't know Mr Mislam Sam, I hope you're putting a cross next to his name,' to which they agreed and said, 'Yes, of course we are.' So you can put all the pre-prepping and everything you want into something, but you are still going to get those fifty-fifty decisions going the wrong way, in my view. Would you agree with that?

Mr Sam: Yes, and I think that is the case right across the board. I cannot stress enough that when you go through a lifestyle in remote communities you are going to have some negative interactions because of how closely knit we are and you are coming from large family groups, tribal groups and what have you and all that sort of thing. You are going to come into contact with the law, no doubt about it. At the end of the day, again we put up so many obstacles through legislation. I was sitting at a co-design meeting just the other week and it is all about the CDP arrangement and I did not realise and I could not even understand the sensibility that within their CDP contract—we are living on an island, for God's sake—as part of their contract they could not do any type of employment related activity or project activity on the water. Anyone would think that we were living out at Mount Isa, and it is the simple little things that the government keeps getting wrong. Again, it comes down to having knowledge of your community. When I was told about this CDP program, as part of their project they could not do any activity on the water.

CHAIR: Yes, but why? Why could they not do any activity on the water? You are not sure? They did not explain the next step?

Mr Sam: That is exactly why the justice group would be in a better position to say who should be eligible for a blue card arrangement for the benefit of the whole community and, more importantly, the kids of this community.

Mr HUNT: Mr Mayor, I am just going to ask you to take an educated guess because you will probably have a good idea because you have the best overall view of what happens in your community. I have written in my personal notes here 'jobs going begging' based on your statements around police CLOs, education and that sort of thing. Of a community of about 3½ thousand—is that sort of ballpark—how many jobs do you think are currently sitting vacant and idle that could be filled if these issues that you are talking about were fixed up? As I say, I am really just asking you to make a guess.

Mr Sam: Off the top of my head, if you include missed opportunities, 50 to 100.

Mr HUNT: That is a significant portion of a population of 3½ thousand. Thank you.

Mr KRAUSE: Thanks for your statements and submissions. The bill that Mr Katter has introduced proposes this framework, which we are all talking about, to deal with some serious offences—that is, Criminal Code offences about stealing with violence, burglary, unlawful entry of a vehicle and then some drug offences as well about trafficking, supply and producing. You mentioned before issues around alcohol management offences as well. If you cannot answer it do not worry, but do you think that is a fair enough list of offences that could be put through this different process, the community justice group process, or should it be smaller or bigger?

Mr Sam: I think it could even be widened with regard to number of years with regard to past offences. As I said earlier, when you are younger you do get yourself into some wayward tracks in life and that is amplified more when you are in these small, remote Indigenous communities. If I had more knowledge in a sense with regard to the whole range of things, but I am not up to date with regard to the whole blue card system and what they approve and do not approve.

Mr KRAUSE: I understand.

Mr Sam: I can tell you now that at the end of the day you would not want to be an impediment to an opportunity for a job. That is all I am talking about—a basic job where you can create a better opportunity, similar to the example of a young lady with a young child who was supposed to be here to talk earlier. What future does she have with that child if she is going to be prevented in gaining meaningful employment because of simple legislation where you see policy gone mad?

CHAIR: Unless someone has a burning question, we might close this hearing.

Ms BUSH: I have one. Mislam, thank you so much for your opening statement. I lived in a small town myself and we had a local copper who lived in town. That was fantastic because we knew him and he knew us; it was also difficult because we did not get away with anything. He knew what was going on. Can you explain to me some of the complications you have here with such a close relationship to police in terms of some of the charging practices perhaps that might occur for you, if you can, whatever you are comfortable saying?

Mr Sam: Probably my mandate from my community is an Indigenous policing model so we can try and experience having a long-term professional policing service that knows the whole community. It is our only way out of this rut. We can forever adopt the program that might have worked wherever, but at the end of the day us being self-sustainable and self-sufficient for our communities is our way forward. We would love the opportunity to have long-serving principals, doctors, nurses and policing officers. I can go on, but I do not want to be negative about my community. I could tell you about an incident over the weekend, and the weekend before that and every other weekend in this calendar year with regard to some things that should not be happening in this current day and age, but in 10 years that is going to be amplified again. It will keep being amplified year in, year out until the shackles that create this welfare basket case in my community are gone. Again, going back to my earlier statement, a brave state government and federal government should work with communities, listen to communities and stop the waste in communities that we see right across the board. We would love the opportunity for long-serving public servants in our community who are our own people so we would not have these issues that we have had for the last four decades.

Ms BUSH: So I am inferring from that that the current police stationed here may not have grown up here? They may not be locals then; is that what you are saying?

Mr Sam: Yes. It is very contentious that policing issue and I do not want to bring up the past and all of that sort of thing.

Ms BUSH: Yes, that is okay. We can talk another time.

Mr Sam: At the end of the day, common respect and working together will solve the problem.

Ms BUSH: Yes. Thank you.

CHAIR: That concludes this hearing. Thank you to everyone who has participated today and all those who have helped organise this meeting. Thank you to our Hansard reporter. A transcript of these proceedings will be available on the committee's webpage in due course and we also contact everyone who has spoken. I declare the public hearing on Palm Island closed.

The committee adjourned at 1.12 pm.