

Can I first pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on, the Noongar people, and pay my respects to Leaders past, present and emerging.

I want to start by noting that 100 years ago, almost to the day, the first World War ended. 400,000 Australians served in that war, 1 in 7 died and 1 in three were wounded or gassed or taken prisoner. It was a terrible toll, it shocked the nation and we are rightly reminded of the cost in memorials in every corner of the country and in ceremonies held every year.

400,000 is a big number; coincidentally it reflects something close to our annual Australian birth cohort. And, the terrible numbers of deaths and casualties in the first War approximately reflect the numbers of Australian children that don't get the kind of start to early life that prepares them for healthy productive lives. Sadly, this is a cost that is largely hidden from view so that it doesn't shock us perhaps as much as it should.

The consultation done in Midland that led to today's launch was the product of the drive of *we the people* led by Helen Dullard who, among many other local champions, has been unwilling to allow the cost of early childhood disadvantage to continue unchallenged in this area. It was enabled by WAPHA and built on a prior study funded by the Department of Health. But these two studies built on decades of local effort many amazing local people. I am sure that in the coming years, this area will be a 'go to' place for people interested in how you make a community fantastic for all children.

The consultation was undertaken by a wonderful team, but can I note my especial thanks to Lisa Joy, Rae McAllister, Melissa Bill and Kaye Richer who deeply understand how a project like this can work and gently guided every stage of the process. Without them, we wouldn't be here.

Approximately 130 local mums with babies, toddlers and infants were involved in the consultation, across places in different parts of the community. And these mums were predominantly those that early years services would tend to regard as having higher levels of need. A large proportion were young Aboriginal mothers, and many were from CALD communities. Many of the Midland mums we spoke to had concerns about their family life or their children's development or both.

So, what did the Midland consultation tell us that we don't already know? It certainly told us that trusted local sources of advice matter most and that vulnerable families are not likely to give any service a second chance if they feel judged or unwelcome. And perhaps that this happens more than it should. And possibly also that it can happen for reasons that aren't always easy to manage in the context of frontline jobs, so that we need to better understand how to support coalface staff in what is often complex and challenging work, because they can make an enormous difference to outcomes for parents and children through the relationships they develop and the care they show. The consultation also reinforced that cultural awareness and the reflection of cultural diversity in services is just so critical to service effectiveness.

But none of this is particularly new. What is more revealing from the Midland consultation is that we have developed our ideas about community *needs* based on a view that doesn't actually fit very well when it comes to vulnerable families. Ideas about *needs* generally stem from planning models that don't actually take enough account of different life circumstances and capacities. And this matters because vulnerable families are, of course, the very people who are going to need assistance most.

So, what is missing in service planning. Well, the Midland consultation suggests it doesn't take account of two additional key things in the lives of many vulnerable families. One is what psychologists call salience and the other is agency. To explain, salience is like our mental 'to do' lists. It includes the way things move from low down in our priorities to top of mind and vice versa. For example, when I am driving to Midland, a car accident isn't very salient for me until I see a truck on the wrong side of the road heading for me!

When our lives are complex, there's a lot of competition in our minds for salience. Imagine you have unstable housing, food insecurity, a problem with your partner, issues with employment or just the full suite. You would have plenty of competition for salient issues.

Agency refers to a feeling of mastery or control. It's great when you have it and all of us have times where we do and don't. But when lives are more complex, agency is usually lower. Sometimes it's pretty much non-existent. When we are younger, it's often lower. When we haven't had the benefit of professional training it can be lower. When we have a mental health problem it can be lower. Remember the feeling of first learning to ride a bike and you'll remember exactly how it feels to have low agency.

When we combine low salience and low agency, the assumptions about how things work for families often don't hold any more. What becomes vastly more important are single or focal known and trusted sources of support, who can be called upon for everything from advice on health, legal issues, housing problems, relationships, and child development.

The Midland consultation told us that in these roles, focal known and trusted people might help a vulnerable parent work out what is most salient for them today and what they can do about it. And then they often help build agency by coaching, by advocating, by walking alongside and going the extra yard. And all this takes time, skill and persistence. But it's often seen as the sideline to the job, whereas for vulnerable people, it is the job.

Our Midland consultation found these critical trusted people doing this work weren't in just one setting. For parents with 0-4-year olds, they are sometimes GP's, or playgroup parents, maybe childcare providers, child health nurses or perhaps neighbours or friends. Whoever they are, across Midland, these are the people who are critical in ensuring issues of local children's development get up the list of salience for parents in vulnerable families and who build agency among local parents so that their kids get better outcomes. The Midland mums we consulted told us that these are the big roles when it comes to reducing the impact of poverty on child development in their families and that these roles need to be better understood, supported and fostered. And of course, Midland just needs more of them. Kaye Richer told me earlier this year that people in these roles understand how to '*breathe*' with people; that is, they know how to move and respond to each family as they find them. That is the best way of describing it that I have ever heard!

I am sure if you asked most of these people who are doing this work in Midland about what they do, many would say "it's nothing special" or that "it's just what anyone would do". But the Midland mums we consulted told us a different story. They told us that it matters deeply, and that relational work is a big part of the deeper solution to the effects of poverty on their families and their children. A long time ago, a world leader called for a war on poverty. We all know that wars get won at the frontline by people who are willing to put themselves on the line.

To finish, can I note that, in typical fashion, service providers in this community have leapt into action to respond to the results of the Midland consultation. In fact, never ones to let the grass grow underfoot, there is a service planning

meeting immediately following this meeting that will map out the next steps in a journey that will make this community the best in Australia for child development. Telethon Kids Institute looks forward to being part of this process and most especially, telling the world about your achievements.