

Kit McMahon Interview on 3CR Radio Breakfast Show, 6 June 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Host:

We've got a very exciting guest on to talk to us about the impact of the state budget for women and gender diverse people. So WHISE is an organisation that is leading in the sector at the moment for gender equality and women's wellbeing across Victoria. Last week, they cautiously welcomed the state budget announcements. The CEO Kit McMahon has nearly two decades of experience across education, training and not for profits, and has consistently and passionately advocated for gender equality empowering women and girls. Kit is joining us this morning to talk through the state budget's impact on women's
Welcome to Tuesday, breakfast Kit.

Kit McMahon:

Good morning, how are you?

Host:

Well, how are you?

Kit McMahon:

Very good. Very good.

Host:

Thanks for joining us today. This is a bit of a huge topic so let's maybe start by telling our listeners a little bit about WHISE and what you do there.

Kit McMahon:

Yeah, for sure. So WHISE stands for Women's Health in the South East. And in Victoria, we're lucky enough that we've got this infrastructure of women's health services - there's 12 of us across Victoria, been around for about 30 years. And what we do is we work in the public health system and with other social systems, for equality for better outcomes for everyone. In particular - women, gender diverse people, people who

face intersectional barriers. But really, the goal is to make sure that everyone benefits from a just and equal society, which we know, there's a lot more work to do.

Host:

So, from this budget, there's been \$30.1 million allocated to fund primary prevention initiatives and family violence. This is of course, a huge issue for women and gender diverse people. And you know, while it does sound like a bit of money, there's also an additional \$622.5 million for family violence service delivery, it actually only makes up 4% of the response investment. Can you talk a bit about this? What are your thoughts on how much has been allocated to this issue?

Kit McMahon:

I think the first thing to say is that budgets are volumes of documents. And they typically talk about new money, and a little bit about what's continuing. What we know is that there's been some great investment. But it's not enough. So, with the state in a tight fiscal environment, we know that, but budgets are still about government's making decisions.

This government has decided to follow through on some of its election commitments, which is what you'd expect from a budget straight after an election. But I guess our cautious concern is that from our perspective, there needs to be more work in prevention. We welcome the investment in the clinics, we welcome the continuing investment in Family Violence response. But it's never enough because we know of the great need, and the increasing need, that people have, and women have in the community. But we also think that we need to do a lot better in understanding the benefit of health promotion and primary prevention. And this is the part of the health system that stops disease, that stops illness that stops problems before they start. And for our money, there's, there's not enough of this, but we're working to try to make sure that that's improved. So yeah, that's what I'd probably say in response to that.

Host:

Yeah, I think that's a really important point, because just existing as a woman in in the world - it's constantly feels like the systems are playing catch up. And you're exactly right, does not do enough focus on prevention across the board.

Kit McMahon:

There's some great things in this budget, right? The investment in women's clinics, specific sexual and reproductive health needs for women. We're keen to see how that lands where it lands, but you can have the service, but people have got to know about it, and they've got to get to it. And then the service has got to be available for people to also feel comfortable to come to it. So that's the job of organisations like us to try to get that to happen.

The second thing is you really want people to not have to go to hospital. There's often talk about the hospitals that are great costs and our community. Let's do this, this do the work, so that people don't have to go to hospital. And we'll see sometimes a bit of confusion about what that might mean, this is not disease management, this is prevention.

The other important thing is that we need to set these systems up, so that they can be available to people from all walks of life. We need to say that, that this is more than a woman or an idea of what a woman is, but that people are from across the community who have different experiences of what it means to be a woman. So that might be a woman newly arrived from, from overseas from war torn countries, through to our First Nations people through to people who might have a body of a woman, but they don't identify as one. So, we've really got to make sure that the services and systems are available to everyone. And that's constant, ongoing work. It's got to be open at a time and a place where people can access them as well.

Host:

Yeah, accessibility is, is a big one, especially for you know, women who are linguistically and culturally diverse and First Nations women. Just the feeling of being able to ask for help and be able to communicate.

Kit

Yeah, that's right. Yeah. And what why not was because we work in some of the most linguistically and diverse communities in Australia. The very assumption that people can self-advocate - that they can they know how to turn up to a GP, that they know how to talk to a GP, that they know that they can go into hospital and ask a question, in those busy environments - that's a privileged assumption. You know, we work with women whose prior experience of government has been the government trying to kill them. So, you need to bring all these different understandings to create services that are open and available for people don't put the service on between, you know, 230 and 430 on a Thursday afternoon, if it's for women, you just don't do that. You think about others in what you do.

Host

Yeah, exactly. And I think one of the things you have addressed in your analysis is getting this information at a community level, rather than making assumptions or painting everything with a broad brush, because it's not the same for all walks of life.

Kit

And that's even more than just different languages as well. It's working with community as well.

Host:

Yeah, exactly. One of the other things that is mentioned is some funds have been directed to ease period poverty, can you tell us what this looks like?

Kit

Yeah, this is great. And this is an important recognition of this issue. This is a setting up of vending machines of accessible products for women to access when they've got the period. Plan International have come out and done some great research about how much it actually costs women to look after themselves, because of their periods - not even the cost of medicines, as well, if you're in menopause, or even if you're a teenager and you're starting your period - something else again. So, this is really good. What we need to do, and this is what health promotion skill does, is wrap this around with basic things like getting people comfortable with walking up to a vending machine or walking up and asking for these products, because it's still a sort of stigma attached to it.

And I guess, we know that this is already out in schools, right? But how can we make these products available to girls in schools, and in the community and women in the community in a way that they can actually get access to them? I said stigma before, but what about in a way that makes sure the products is already there, that the products in a safe space, that the product is not destroyed before you get there? Or that it's in an environment where all communities can get access to them. So this is really good, but budgets sort of the start of the process. Then we've got to get people understanding what the services are for what those products are for and get it done.

Host:

Exactly. And that's a lot of the work that you will be doing it WHISE. One of the other things I wanted to touch on quickly is mental health, which is a huge issue for women. You know, they're experiencing higher rates of depression and anxiety, eating disorders. And this has been negatively impacted by the pandemic as well. What's WHISE's focus on primary prevention and health promotion for mental health?

Kit McMahan:

We want to see, as we talked about before, that the reforms that are coming through Victoria understand that gender influences the way that mental health and wellbeing is experienced and to be honest, there's a lot of work to do there. In the region that I work in, we have higher rates of depression, but also higher rates of presentation to hospital for suicidality with women. So the work that we're doing is trying to change the system to accommodate that and create different services that that have merit for for all genders. But also to actually put investment and investment for people's wellbeing. So, it's not just about ill health, it's about mental wellbeing as well.

Host

Yeah, definitely. I think that, you know, there's just so much we could talk about in that. But I think that, you know, you have touched on this throughout, but as a final note, what are the ways in which WHISE will be sort of continuing to advocate for women and gender diverse people, especially marginalized people in the community?

Kit McMahan

Absolutely. Bringing those marginalized stories to the center. So, when we go and we talk to the people that run our health system, or the people in community health – we are centering those stories, we are bringing the evidence in a gender disaggregated way to show that the different lived experience. And it's also equipping community, going, and working with women in community, to teach them how to work with the system and advocating for them with that system. And putting the investment in wellbeing and putting the time into people being well, so that we can reduce the chance of getting sick.

Host:

Amazing. Unfortunately, that's all we have time for this morning. Thank you so much. And we'd love to have you back. You know, maybe in a few months to see how all of this is progressing, as well.

Kit McMahan

Love to!