

# Community Services Industry Combined Response

PREMIER'S ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RECOVERY  
ADVISORY COUNCIL — STAGE ONE CONSULTATION

June 2020



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Tasmania's community services industry has been essential to the success of our state's health-focussed, compassionate response to the COVID-19 crisis.**

Together our more than 10,000 workers and tens of thousands of associated volunteers have worked with government, business and communities to support the needs of those people whose circumstances changed as a direct result of the COVID-19 response as well as 120,000 Tasmanians who continue to live in vulnerable circumstances. Our industry's capacity to respond quickly and effectively has been a key to the success of the emergency response and the ongoing wellbeing of Tasmanians from all walks of life.

From mental health support to emergency food relief, family violence and supporting students to learn from home, our industry provided support where and how it was needed. From this experience, we learned that reducing our services is not an option during a crisis with demand for support coming from a wider and deeper cross section of Tasmanians, especially as older Tasmanians became increasingly isolated and tens of thousands of people suddenly lost their jobs.

The challenges of this time have brought great opportunities, showing us new ways in which services can be delivered and with a wider range of Tasmanians connected to the support they need.

The following summaries and examples of issues arising during COVID-19 provide insight into the passionate commitment of our industry to supporting Tasmanians through challenging times and to do it with efficiency, effectiveness and compassion.

The key opportunities raised across the industry include:

- > Increased digital infrastructure and capacity for services and service users.
- > Rebuilding our resilience by investing in flexible community services that meet the needs of Tasmanians facing new and increased hardship as a result of COVID-19.
- > Collaborative partnerships within government departments and across other industries.
- > Long-term funding certainty to encourage investment in workforce and service delivery that meets increased and emerging needs.

We are proud of how agile, adaptable and productive our industry has proven to be during the COVID-19 response and we are eager to continue to support our community to build resilience as we recover from this crisis.

We are confident our post-COVID-19 Tasmania will be one in which the state's community services industry provides support to all Tasmanians who need it.



# 1 What impacts are currently being seen by your sector or members (including clients/households/individuals as relevant in your context) and what impacts are anticipated in the coming weeks and months?

COVID-19 has had varied impacts on the community services industry, revealing both challenges and opportunities. Challenges include obstacles to service delivery due to physical distancing requirements. This has meant some service users did not receive the level of support they required or it could not be offered in the form they required or preferred. Many organisations had demand that simply could not be met.

Organisational budgets have also been impacted due to a loss of income from either social enterprises, traditional fundraising or where fee for service income had reduced. Additional expenses were incurred as a consequence of supporting staff to work remotely or implementing alternative methods of service delivery to assist clients, placing further strain on budgets into the future.

Opportunities included the impetus to introduce new ways of doing business that will be beneficial if they can continue in the future.

“ [We] moved to a remote workforce, cancelled all our scheduled face-to-face professional development, training, networking and conference opportunities and moved to online platforms to continue supporting our members. Individual staff member's roles have quickly become focussed on reacting to issues arising from COVID-19 and supporting our members with the ever-changing environment. We have not changed our service to members, just had to change the platforms of delivery.”

“ For our members their services had to very quickly become COVID-safe as they are deemed essential services and remained open during the pandemic. This required rapid changes to office configurations to allow for social distancing, staggering client times, alternating working days for staff, and increased and strict hygiene practices with extra screening and assessments undertaken.”

“ ... offering telehealth appointments however have not proven to be particularly successful for a number of reasons — clients don't have mobile phones or live in an area with poor phone service, don't have any credit, no internet, no wi-fi available, etc. When telehealth has been used, it has been reported by both clients and workers that it is not as satisfactory as face-to-face service provision — it's difficult to engage, build and maintain rapport, does not feel particularly authentic, IT platforms can be unreliable.”

The key impacts of COVID-19 that were identified include:

## Pressure on workforce

- > Significant changes to requirements on staff/volunteers resulting in high levels of stress, isolation and vicarious trauma.
- > Increased workload related to COVID-19 safety, risk and compliance.
- > Impact on employment of parents/guardians due to school closures.
- > Impact on volunteering sector, with 90% of volunteers impacted and volunteering hours significantly reduced. 70% of programs suspended and 20% of programs experienced a spike in demand.
- > Increased monitoring and communication of issues impacting clients and population groups.

## Financial viability

- > Significant loss of income (up to 80%) for organisations conducting social enterprises, traditional fundraising or fee for service activities.
- > Investment and fast-tracking of IT transitions (e.g. migration to cloud, CRMs, hardware and software, digital devices).
- > Requirement to renegotiate contracts/grants to deliver services in the new context.
- > Increased costs related to COVID-19 safety, risk and compliance.

## Barriers to providing services

- > Reduced ability/capacity for organisations to deliver services due to restrictions.
- > Clients having to navigate changes to models/platforms of service delivery (e.g. loss of face-to-face services, online services).
- > Barriers for people needing to access support for the first time, not sure where to go for help.
- > Inconsistencies in application of guidelines, such as use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and visits to Residential Aged Care Facilities (RACF).

- > Digital access is not always successful for service delivery due to barriers to online engagement (e.g. technology, access, impairment).
- > State Government COVID-19 messaging focussed strongly on clinical preparedness. Information and messaging about the role of community services was not as comprehensive or informative, leading to confusion about the appropriate practices to implement.

### Barriers to accessing services

- > Clients making the choice not to access services, due to messaging resulting in increased risks to health over medium-term.
- > Insufficient supports for vulnerable cohorts due to isolation (e.g. fewer face-to-face services, less in-home services).
- > Lack of family violence resources, safety concerns due to increased pressures and stress.
- > Increased discrimination towards people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.
- > Reduced access to transport.

### Increased need for services in the community

- > Increased demand for essential services (e.g. food, emergency relief, counselling, employee assistance, online training and education).
- > Reported increases in family violence, elder abuse and mental health issues.
- > Anticipated 'bill shock' with utilities when meter readings recommence and other moratoriums are lifted.
- > Higher levels of anxiety and social isolation in the community.
- > People on temporary visas requiring assistance due to loss of income and no financial supports.
- > Difficulty accessing support for family violence, safety concerns due to increased pressures and stress.
- > Increased living costs not compensated for by a corresponding increase in Disability Support Pension (DSP).
- > Many informal family and community supports no longer available.

## 2 What factors are likely to shape the medium and longer-term impacts for your sector/members?

Many organisations expect the current impacts to continue for some weeks and months. Foremost among these will be the increased demand on services resulting from COVID-19 impacts such as loss of employment, increased isolation and frayed personal relationships.

As restrictions ease and employees return to workplaces, there will be further impacts due to the changes required to ensure safe workplaces (such as additional spacing, sanitising, need for PPE), supporting clients living in vulnerable circumstances to access services, restructuring workforces and costs incurred by offering multiple methods of service delivery that were previously not offered.

It is also likely that increased numbers of Tasmanians will need to access support as restrictions ease, income supplements and moratoriums end, and as winter sets in.

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 " We expect that we won't be returning to an office-based environment for the most part and be far more community-based with staff working from their home offices. Likely that we will encourage the use of technology for admin and meetings internally and with some stakeholders."

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 " ... there may be an expectation for us to deliver both models and without increased resourcing this cannot happen. Employees have been running hard to adapt to the changes and we may see the workforce overly fatigued and not be able to keep up with the change back to a different practice ... managing the risks, workforce and cleaning will be difficult as we have such a small team and the admin, reporting and standards associated with operating a business normally was already a large feat."

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 " Some consumers are worried that when services return to normal some of the positive changes won't remain for them. For example, services like telehealth won't remain for those who need it and more vulnerable groups choosing to self-isolate will be forced out to access service."

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The key impacts anticipated for the next few weeks and months include:

### Increased need for services in the community

- > Increased need for assistance (e.g. requests for support, emergency relief over winter, accommodation). Forecasted increases especially with removal of JobSeeker supplements.
- > Influx of clients as restrictions ease, including new cohorts seeking assistance.
- > Increased demand from families/students for education support as school returns.
- > Increased prevention and early intervention messaging for alcohol and other drugs (AOD) to support healthier choices regarding AOD and address new increased risk.
- > Need for a range of mental health supports to address ongoing stress and anxiety.

### Pressure on workforce

- > Change fatigue as we transition to a 'new normal' impacting workers and clients.
- > Continued increased workloads for community service organisations that have replaced government services that are closed.
- > Concerns that positive changes (e.g. telehealth) may be wound back.
- > Additional workload with resumption of normal operations.
- > Ensuring compliance and diligence with implementing the WorkSafe Tasmania regulations regarding social distancing, hygiene and supporting clients to adhere to the requirements.
- > Social distancing of staff in businesses with space limitations.

### Financial viability

- > Expectation of delivering a hybrid of previous and new models of service delivery within limited resources and without increased resourcing.
- > Concerns about meeting insurance, public liability and compliance requirements.
- > Deficit budgets/operating losses for months ahead.

### Barriers to providing services

- > Ongoing unmet housing need — need for solutions to homelessness/longer-term accommodation.
- > Barriers to digital inclusion continuing to exist.

## 3 What data or information can currently be provided to the Council on the nature and magnitude of impacts for your sector/members?

Organisations have been collecting data on demand for their services but reported that with rapid changes to their operating environment affecting changing demand the data was quickly outdated. Many had collected significant qualitative data and anecdotal evidence, which is key to documenting the impacts of COVID-19 from the service user perspective.

“Data is being collected by all organisations across the community services industry. The sharing of information from these organisations by the funding bodies for everyone to learn from would be an excellent step forward.”

The key data and information being collected includes:

### Service level data

- > Organisational KPIs and record-keeping.
- > Internal surveys and interviews.
- > Service data (e.g. occupancy levels, time in case management, referrals, support provided).

### Industry and community-wide research

- > ABS, sector bodies and commissioned or new research, such as the Tasmania Project, Family Experience Project, Towards Just Futures, Experience of Volunteers during COVID-19.

*Note: A number of organisations are collecting their own data through surveys and records-keeping and some research projects have been specifically commissioned and will be available in coming weeks and months.*

## 4 What mitigation measures are currently in place that aim to address these impacts?

The community services industry was quick to adapt to the challenges presented by COVID-19. Our agility and innovations include changing the way services were delivered by:

- > offering new services,
- > increasing collaboration with other service providers including those outside the industry,
- > improving communication within organisations and with service users; and
- > rapidly developing practices and procedures to comply with government and health advice while also maintaining professional standards.

“ We are delivering emergency assistance from some of our op shop sites. We have plans and the ability to increase the number of sites from which we can provide such assistance. We are also managing staffing and financial resources to enable to us to meet demand when it arises.”

“ We have put in a range of service changes including: all service having online capacity, we have changed our service model for emergency relief and are increasing partnerships with other agencies ... our Community Wellbeing team has engaged in a range of local place-based collaborations to ensure the right information is getting to clients and tenants. We have increased Facebook and online advertising to reach people who would not previously have needed the services we offer. We have put in place a phone check-in for tenants where we called people to see if there was anything specific they needed. Family programs are doing a range of new style of supports through phone and online. All staff now have capacity to work through teams and deliver online and phone support.”

“ With regard to keeping staff safe and well; home working, staggered office working roster and regular mental health and wellbeing check-ins and supporting initiatives. The organisation has diverted more resources than we have to this support. I anticipate this will need to continue for many months to come.”

The key measures identified to address impacts include:

### New flexible service models and work practices

- > The development of new business plans, policies and procedures for workers, client support and service delivery.
- > Changes to operations and staffing, working remotely, adapted service delivery models.
- > Development of industry codes and guidelines, information sheets.
- > Flexibility in reporting contract outputs and KPIs has helped relieve pressure on service providers.
- > Increase in hygiene practices and use of PPE.

### Utilising increased resources

- > Increased volunteers and hours.
- > Grants programs (e.g. Essential Technology Fund, Community Managed Mental Health and Alcohol and Drug Sector COVID-19 Technology Fund, Primary Health Network and COVID-19 Capacity Building Fund).
- > State Government funding and support programs.
- > JobKeeper has enabled retention of staff.

### Improved communication, connectivity and collaboration

- > Support helplines (e.g. National COVID Older Persons Information hotline, A Tasmanian Lifeline).
- > New websites (e.g. Work45+).
- > New campaigns (e.g. elder abuse prevention, visiting GP, AOD).
- > Participation on working groups, online communities, weekly communiques, virtual meetings and new information resources developed.
- > Collaboration within the industry.
- > Increased communication to raise awareness of what services are continuing or available.

### Reduction of services

- > Reducing programs to save costs.

## 5 What impacts are not being mitigated or for which there is no plan in place to mitigate?

A common throughout the responses was that organisations have been focussed and dedicated to successfully responding to the immediate impacts of COVID-19 and not all have had the capacity to plan adequately for a smooth transition to service delivery post-COVID-19.

This includes:

- > ensuring there is sufficient funding to continue current operations,
- > preparedness for a potential 'second wave',
- > an expected increase in demand for many services, particularly as some of the current supports drop away (e.g. JobSeeker supplement, protections around rental eviction and electricity disconnections); and
- > the additional resources required to safely return staff to the workplace.

All organisations emphasised the need for funding certainty, particularly with contracts due to expire at the end of June 2020. Many noted that the flexibility provided by their funders (particularly the State Government) during the pandemic has enabled service continuity as well as more person-centred care, which they hope will continue beyond the State of Emergency.

“ The importance of regional approaches and place-based; ensuring the supports are equally accessible by people no matter where they live in Tasmania; work with local organisations that know their communities well and can access volunteer support as well as call on organisational capacity.”

“ Future planning for service delivery and access needs to include purpose-built space to manage the risks. Resourcing appropriately to meet the increased need in crisis support. Increased staffing to manage the increased workload.”

The key issues for the industry include:

### Addressing the impact on those most affected

- > Temporary visa holders who require assistance with rent, purchase of food and other living expenses.
- > Understanding and addressing the specific social and economic impacts on populations such as older people, young people, women as carers, people with disabilities and men.
- > Empathetic understanding of male experiences that lead to suicide and family violence.
- > Digital divide and impact on most vulnerable.
- > Adult literacy and numeracy skills development in tandem with digital literacy skills.
- > Underlying issues of poverty and lack of access to pathways to improve life.

### A focus on planned community-led recovery

- > Social inclusion and encouraging safe reintegration.
- > Learnings to build community resilience and connection.
- > Importance of regional approaches and place-based, ensuring recovery initiatives engage with regional and local communities.
- > Single channel of information and clearer communication.

### Planned resourcing to meet increased future need particularly around digital access, mental health and food security

- > Resourcing to meet forecast increased numbers/demand for services.
- > Funding agreements and concerns for future service provision.
- > Food security and policies that assist to adapt or build resilience in our food system.
- > Digital divide and impact on most vulnerable.
- > Increased case coordination for people not previously accessing social services.
- > Preventative measures in relation to budgeting, mental health and anxiety.
- > Stigma, discrimination and tackling AOD, family violence, sexual assault and mental health holistically.
- > Building backlog of clients requiring assessments.
- > Loss of revenue from fundraising activities.
- > Inability to expand services due to limited resources.
- > Long-term isolation and lack of face-to-face service.
- > Telephone and IT support for families and mental health.
- > Support for the industry to adapt to new ways of doing things without being disadvantaged financially by their funding bodies.
- > PPE equipment and reimbursement for equipment.
- > Future planning for service delivery and purpose-built space to manage access and risks.
- > Increased staffing to manage advocacy for socially isolated clients.

## 6 What responses, both within the industry and more broadly, are front of mind and over what timeframes — what should be stopped, what should continue and what should be started?

The industry has valued close and open communication with the government during the pandemic and it is hoped this will continue. Most organisations also reported they feel more connected to the communities they serve and with the issues that have emerged and will emerge in coming weeks and months. These connections should be leveraged by government to inform decisions on responding to key areas of need.

There was widespread acknowledgement of the State Government's success in leading the response to the pandemic. The consensus is that, as we move into the recovery phase, more consultation will be key, particularly with cohorts that will remain or become vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. Engagement with the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) is a welcome step.

This broad consultation needs to enable communities, particularly regional communities, to participate in community-led recovery. The collaboration and partnerships that have emerged in communities were vital to ensuring essential needs have been met. Many responses urged the government to ensure these community-led solutions continue and to be considered as models for future service delivery.

JobKeeper has been vital in retaining employment in the industry and must continue. The eligibility criteria should be broadened to support those in our community ineligible and avoid the cost-shifting to the state of supporting temporary visa holders, casual workers and local government employees.

The industry would also welcome the earliest possible advice from government regarding intentions to fund, extend contracts and/or provide longer-term funding agreements. This will enable more effective service planning and provide certainty for the industry.

Skilling Tasmanians is viewed as essential to our recovery. This is broader than just apprenticeships and traineeships. It should extend to adult literacy skills, digital literacy, health literacy and other adult learning. There are strong social, economic and health benefits in doing so.

Greater stimulation for economic recovery, greater focus on working with systems that use collaboration and demonstrate positive partnership work, place-based local responses need to be supported, looking at ways to have quick responses which trust agencies/organisations. Commence: targeted support for innovations such as social enterprises, start-ups and local support groups. Start: social procurement policies."

A planned and structured approach, looking at service delivery across the next 6-18 months. Acceptance from funding bodies that some activities are more resource intensive than before meaning that KPIs need to be flexible or resources increased (wary of dilemma of needing to find, recruit and train more staff)."

In the disability support worker industry, I have found a completely unsatisfactory supply of PPE along with any support or information regarding clients and COVID-19."

The key priorities for the industry include:

### Addressing the impact on those most affected

- > Stopping ageist language and references.
- > More nuanced messaging for older/vulnerable groups and increased supports for those cohorts encouraged to remain at home.
- > Increased representation of women and gendered issues.
- > Addressing harassment and discrimination.
- > Focus on disability issues.



## A focus on planned community lead recovery

- > Continue internal surveys and data collection.
- > Good communication and engagement between the government and community services industry has been positive and should continue.
- > Clear communication between agencies and community engagement.
- > Support for region-based, place-based solutions and community engagement models.

## Planned resourcing to meet increased future need particularly around digital access, mental health and food security

- > Address funding certainty for services including the Equal Remuneration Order (ERO).
- > Continued emphasis on health and safety.
- > Return to school requiring commencement of school breakfast program.
- > Additional staff.
- > Additional supports for mature-age job seekers.
- > Additional mental health supports including impacts on families/friends/carers providing support to people with mental illness.
- > Increased efforts to improve digital inclusion (especially for older and lower socio-economic cohorts).
- > Move from response to longer-term sustainable community recovery responses.
- > Social enterprise opportunities to provide real work experience.
- > Additional funding and collaborative approaches to addressing projected increase in demand for services.
- > Greater stimulation for economic recovery.
- > Continued access to PPE.
- > JobKeeper and further grants/subsidies for not-for-profits.
- > Increase construction of social housing and reduce homelessness.

## 7 What would help create or build business/consumer/community confidence?

The community services industry acknowledges the State Government's strong leadership and extensive communication provided during the pandemic as well as swift action to provide support and assistance in areas of need. Business and community confidence will be built through a continued emphasis on community health and safety, good decision-making and as much certainty as possible about the lifting of Public Health restrictions to enable planning for a full return to service provision.

Organisations noted that COVID-19 saw many new users of their services, highlighting the fact that people experience hardship through no fault of their own and can be made vulnerable suddenly. Appropriate and sufficient supports are needed to ensure all Tasmanians experiencing hardship are not left behind. Continued acknowledgement of these facts, and the value of the industry's daily work to support Tasmanians, will help create, sustain and build confidence in the industry.

Our community services industry responded to COVID-19 by making significant organisational and workforce changes while finding new ways of delivering outcomes. While not all of these changes have been welcome (remote delivery of services has not been possible in all circumstances, so some Tasmanians missed out on help they required), there have been many positive aspects to the innovation that has occurred. Our industry would benefit from a funding and contracting environment that supports them to continue with successful innovations and adopt new approaches that deliver improved outcomes for the most marginalised people across the state.

We welcome government investment in economic stimulus measures that create secure jobs, build our resilience to future health, economic and environmental shocks and help to reduce disadvantage. These include:

- > investment in social and affordable housing,
- > household energy efficiency upgrades,
- > digital connectivity and inclusion,
- > employment and training programs,
- > business/community social inclusion activities; and
- > supporting social enterprises and new business start-ups.

Feedback from our communities indicates a high level of respect and support for the State Government in how it has handled the crisis. If this is sustained, we believe confidence will remain. People are now looking for this strong leadership to be demonstrated in the recovery phase.”

Empty shops are likely to be an issue. We must start thinking of ways that these spaces could be used and not remain empty (e.g. small business displays who do not have a physical address, community group activities, street libraries, swap shops, tutoring and education, art stations and exhibits).”

The key suggestions to build confidence include:

### Leadership and clear messaging

- > Return to normal as soon as possible.
- > Regular communication between peak bodies and sharing of data.
- > Continued communication/provision of factual information.
- > Continue stepped process with clear guidance for all members of the community.
- > Tight controls/responses to virus outbreaks.
- > For people with disability (e.g. more accessible forms of information, including easy-to-read information that explains relaxation of restrictions).
- > Strong leadership.
- > Clear messaging and access to plain language resources.
- > Support to keep people in the workplace and not at home.

### Partnerships and collaboration

- > New partnerships and streamlining of services.
- > Continue TasCOSS-led community services industry meetings.
- > Innovation and adopt approaches that have worked elsewhere and that reach deep into regions and towns.
- > More collaboration between the various sectors and the government on the way forward.
- > Campaigns to target preventative anxiety and mental health.

### Celebrate success

- > Celebrate success — large and small and promote good news stories.
- > Identification of niche areas where Tasmania can excel as well as promoting current areas of excellence.

### Targeted stimulus for social and economic outcomes

- > Business enterprise planning assistance.
- > Capital equipment grants for work-based training and employment for vulnerable groups.
- > Support and assistance to the public and non-government organisations in areas presenting need for the longer-term.
- > Government investment in initiatives that stimulate economic recovery, such as social and affordable housing, employment programs for unemployed, free childcare, building and capital works projects.
- > Offering financial relief to small community groups that have lost finances, such as reduced power, water services or rates and insurance costs.
- > Universally accessible support programs for families recognising that more families have become vulnerable post-COVID-19.
- > Strong investment in Tasmanians of workforce age from a social and economic perspective.
- > Funding and council planning for community events that promote social connection with active physical distancing.
- > Bring forward capital expenditure projects.



## 8 What would help your sector/ members re-employ where there have been reductions in jobs, or grow employment levels?

Many organisations did not report a loss of employees due to their funding sources and their role in providing essential and in demand services. However, many organisations acknowledged the importance of being able to access JobKeeper as a key factor in retaining staff and expressed a strong desire for this program to continue.

The primary factor in retaining or increasing employment for all organisations was the need for long-term funding certainty. Wage subsidies and investment in skills and training were also common responses.

“ A more skills-based requirement for canteen managers who feed our children. No set requirements at the moment. Would link into our hospitality pathway and meet the needs for skilled staff in this area into the future.”

The key suggestions to increase employment include:

### Flexible and viable funding models

- > Longer-term commitment to core government funding/multi-year funding agreements.
- > Additional funding to meet the increasing demand for services.
- > Flexibility around contracts to allow delivery of service as clients need.
- > Financial incentives and additional funding for new programs and projects such as social enterprises and partnership models.

### Investing in a skilled and engaged workforce

- > Greater clarity around volunteering by over 70 age group.
- > Investment in skills, training and new pathways.
- > Wage subsidies for employing disadvantaged cohorts, such as young people, migrants and women.
- > A system to assist organisations to fill short-term vacancies at short notice.
- > Review the Federal Government Employment Assistance Fund (EAF) to ensure funding for workplace accommodations is readily available.
- > Support for volunteering to learn new skills, make new connections and networks, share their own skills and experience, and provide a pathway back into employment.
- > Slow, considered and careful easing of restrictions to avoid a 'second wave' and uncertainty of businesses closing again.





**INTEGRITY  
COMPASSION  
INFLUENCE**

The Tasmanian Council of Social Service (TasCOSS) is the peak body for the community services industry in Tasmania.

**Our Mission** is to challenge and change the systems, behaviours and attitudes that create poverty, inequality and exclusion.

**Our Vision** is of one Tasmania, free of poverty and inequality where everyone has the same opportunity.

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