

COLLECTION OF UNPAID FINES AND CHARGES, CHANGES TO SYSTEM

Statement by Minister for Justice

MR J.B. D'ORAZIO (Ballajura - Minister for Justice) [2.05 pm]: I advise the house that a major overhaul of Western Australia's system for collecting unpaid fines and charges is under way. New measures will be introduced to reduce the number of people who are imprisoned simply for non-payment of fines. At the same time, we will introduce measures to ensure that fine defaulters meet their responsibilities. This will bring substantial community benefits and end the types of situations such as those I encountered in Eastern Goldfields Regional Prison recently, where I met a tribal elder who did not understand why he was in prison. I also met a mother who was being held in the Boronia Pre-release Centre for Women and who had had to make arrangements for her children while she paid off a debt that she could never have paid on her income.

In tackling this issue I have been particularly concerned about the continually high rate of indigenous imprisonment. In particular, I am concerned about the number of indigenous people from regional and remote areas who have been imprisoned, many of whom are in custody for the non-payment of fines. It does not make sense to lock up fine defaulters with convicted criminals, and it costs far more to imprison fine defaulters than we could ever collect from them. If all the current outstanding warrants for fine defaulting were enforced, we would have a massive increase in prisoners in our already crowded jails. About 150 prisoners are currently working off outstanding fines at \$150 a day. Each prisoner costs the community \$250 a day, with a total cost to the state from such prisoners of about \$13 million each year.

Our new strategy includes reviewing all warrants of commitment and working with defaulters to pay their debts or to do community work instead of going to prison. We are considering making access to Centrepay, which enables payments to be made from Centrelink benefits, available in all courts in Western Australia. We will explore additional information sharing and assistance in signing up offenders to Centrepay arrangements. I will also seek agreement from the federal government to allow the garnishing of wages or taxation or other benefits for the repayment of fines. The work of the sheriff and community juvenile justice officer service currently located in Kalgoorlie-Boulder will be extended to the Pilbara region to improve repayments in regional and remote communities. Fine defaulters will also be able to work off their fines more quickly by doing community work rather than being sent to prison. The rate of pay for community work will increase from \$150 to \$300. We will expand weekend community work options so defaulters can complete their community work obligations without affecting employment or education. Community work officers will also be based in both Halls Creek and Newman to further enhance community work options.

More than 14 000 motor drivers' licences are currently suspended as a result of non-payment of fines. Suspended licence numbers and other information will be published to alert defaulters and the general public to the implications of driving with a suspended licence. This is a more effective approach to collecting the estimated \$120 million in outstanding fines and charges imposed by Western Australian courts, government agencies and local governments than is sending offenders to prison.