

YOUTH HOMELESSNESS

Statement

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [10.00 pm]: As many members would know already, last week was National Youth Week. It was a week spent celebrating some of the truly inspirational achievements of many of our talented young people and the minister did a fine job of being out and about last week marking those achievements.

Unfortunately there is always a dark side to an event like youth week and it was marked during the week with national Youth Homelessness Matters Day. Much less was said about that, at least by the state government here, than about the lighter side to youth week. Indeed, I take nothing away from the fact that many of the stories that we heard and many of the achievements we marked last week were quite inspirational. However, I took up the issue of youth homelessness and in the course of doing that I had the fortune to come across a couple of quite extraordinary young people and it is to mark their contribution to that day last week that I rise tonight.

I guess the main message that I got from last week when I talked to a number of people about youth homelessness was the fact that there is a significant lack of public awareness about the extent of this problem. I think it is simply something that is in many senses too hard to think about because it is so distressing to think that there are young people out there tonight who are not just couch surfing and who are not simply unable to go home but who are actually sleeping rough on the streets as the weather gets colder. What I found as I started to talk about the issue last week was that the extent of people's surprise focused on the number of homeless young people in Western Australia. I was using the figure of 5 000; in fact, I note that the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia is actually talking about 5 400 young people who sleep away from their homes and who are, in effect, homeless every night of the year in Western Australia. As distressing as that raw figure of 5 400 is the fact that between 80 and 90 per cent of the young people who front up to homeless shelters looking for a bed for the night are actually turned away every night. We can only start to imagine as we sit here tonight what it must be like to work for a service that regularly turns away up to 90 per cent of its clients every night because it cannot accommodate them.

I put out a statement about midweek and spoke to a few of the media outlets about some of the background to my press release. Again, I have to say that I am not taking anything away from the achievements of the inspirational young people we heard from during the lighter side of National Youth Week. I was asked by one radio station—it was not a request that surprised me because radio stations do not like to talk to people like me; they probably do not even want to talk to people like the minister—whether some of the young people might be prepared to talk about their own stories. I made a couple of calls and ended up talking to the Joondalup Youth Support Services—a great bunch of people whom I have not met yet. I have an appointment to go up there in the next couple of weeks and I will, of course, take Tony O'Gorman with me. Tony is a regular visitor and the Joondalup Youth Support Services are very familiar with the work he does in the Joondalup area. I will meet these people face to face in the next couple of weeks. After some discussion with their own workers they were able to provide me with two young people who were happy to tell their stories. This is not an insignificant thing; it is not a stress-free experience to talk on live radio, full stop. But to ask young people to talk on live radio about something as intensely personal as their own experience of homelessness is quite a big ask. I was very impressed that they came up with two young people.

The first time we set up the interview, unfortunately the young woman, Alicia, who tells me she does not mind being named, was unable to come because her son was taken ill and she had to pick him up from day care and take him to the doctor. He is three and she is 19. When we begin to piece some of this together, we realise that this is a young woman who has notched up a fair amount of experience at an age when many young people are only beginning to speculate about what life might hold for them. The radio station was flexible enough to put the whole thing back 24 hours, and we gathered up Jeremiah as well, who had indicated that he was happy to tell his story. We ended up doing a phone interview with both these young people. I went into the studio where both of them spoke on the phone. When we hear a 19-year-old young woman talk about spending some time sleeping in bus shelters, we begin to put a real human face to a story that seems to be full of statistics. The reality is that youth homelessness, like all forms of homelessness, is not straightforward. People who are familiar with the problem will know that we talk about primary, secondary and tertiary homelessness. Primary homelessness is the most stark and dramatic kind in which people literally do not have a roof over their heads. We are talking about people who live on the streets, sleep in parks, squat in derelict buildings, sleep in their cars or use public transport as their sleeping place. Secondary homelessness is about people who move from one type of shelter to another. We are talking here about people who live for short periods in shelters, hostels, boarding houses or, indeed, with other households but without any security of tenure. We also talk about tertiary homelessness, which is about people who live in places such as bed and breakfast accommodation or boarding houses for

medium to long terms, but they do not have their own kitchens or bathrooms. Again they have none of the security that would be provided by a lease.

On Friday afternoon we heard first-hand accounts from Jeremiah and Alicia of all three types of homelessness. As I said, Alicia had spent time sleeping in bus shelters trying to keep dry. She was asked by the radio host what that was like and she said, “Well, actually, it was quite scary.” I thought that was putting it mildly. We read constantly about people who do not feel safe in their own home, so we can imagine what it must be like sleeping in a bus shelter all night.

Jeremiah had his stories, too, about not having a place to call home, having to rely on friends and acquaintances to put him up for the night, and having constantly to move on. One of the things we need to remember is that young people—Alicia and Jeremiah are classic examples—do not choose to live on the streets; they are usually escaping violence, have mental health concerns, or are dealing with alcohol or drugs in the family home. I have already said that every night there are nearly 5 500 young people who are defined as “homeless” in one of the three senses I have outlined. When the Labor Party was in government we increased funding, recognising that Western Australia was not doing particularly well on this front. The sad thing is that we now see the Western Australian economy growing stronger every day, yet we do not seem able to stop this growing trend of youth homelessness. There is money going into the field from the federal government and the state government, but we as a community have to do our bit to increase awareness of this problem and to put some real help in place to stop the problem of homelessness arising in the first place. We need to provide for these young people, and we need to stop it happening.