

YOUNG PEOPLE HOUSED IN AGED CARE FACILITIES

Grievance

MS J.A. RADISICH (Swan Hills) [9.32 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Disability Services, and concerns young people being inappropriately housed in aged care facilities. As the minister will no doubt be aware, the lives of 600 000 Western Australians are affected by disability, and 200 000 of those people are carers, or people who provide support to those with disabilities. This matter is causing a great deal of concern in my electorate. People regularly raise with me the problem of the inappropriate practice of accommodating people under the age of 50 in facilities designed for people aged from 60 years to the end of their days. My research indicates that 55 people under the age of 50 are housed in aged care facilities in this state, which I find to be a totally unacceptable situation. Staggeringly, this figure is rising.

I have one constituent named Rob Taylor, with whom I have had quite a few dealings through my office. He is in a tragic situation. He is only 45 years of age and has suffered an illness causing disability. He is now housed in a facility alongside 80 and 90-year-olds in the eastern metropolitan region. Rob's wife, Leanne, has exhausted every possible option, spending many hours dealing with bureaucracies and trying to find appropriate accommodation for Rob. The fact of the matter is that there is just nothing for him, and that is a problem that we must resolve. It is a very depressing prospect for somebody in this situation. Time is valuable for family members, and when there is an illness in the family, time should not be wasted on battling with bureaucracies, when care and attention is needed for the whole family, particularly the sufferer. It is certainly a no-win situation, and leaves the whole family in a very distressing state. This situation must be addressed as a matter of urgency. It is, in my view, an avoidable situation, but it requires government commitment and investment to resolve.

It is not a new problem; it has existed for many years. I believe we have children as young as nine years old inappropriately housed in accommodation built and managed for the support of seniors. Frankly, we do not have enough aged care accommodation as it is, without having those beds urgently needed for dementia and other elderly patients being taken by younger people who have special needs and require rehabilitation and opportunities for social interaction at a different level to those needed by older persons. Quite clearly, the needs of seniors in aged care facilities are quite different from those of younger people facing disability and requiring specialised accommodation. The federal government is responsible for funding aged care facilities and, as I mentioned, this state is already grossly under-serviced in that respect. I would think that the minister and the federal government would have a mutually agreed objective of providing appropriate accommodation for young people in nursing homes.

I commend the government, because I understand that there is a program for young people in nursing homes which has seen 86 young Western Australians moved out of residential aged care. This is a tremendous achievement, but 55 people are still in that situation, which must be redressed. My research also indicates that in the past the Howard government has unfortunately been unwilling to negotiate any form of joint approach, and has passed the buck back to the states, as it has done with so many issues in the past few years. This is clearly no way to address such an important issue. The problem of young people inappropriately accommodated needs desperate attention, particularly in view of the growing population. In the past we have seen parents keeping disabled children at home. It is my experience that this occurs often in ethnic families, but I am sure it occurs in other families as well. However, now we have parents in their 70s, 80s and 90s looking after children with often acute disabilities who are 40 to 60 years old themselves. This simply does not work. The burden on those elderly people of looking after their disabled ageing children is unbearable. Many of these parents cannot sustain this physically, let alone economically. Again, this draws attention to the urgency of the problem.

I am aware that funding is available under the commonwealth innovative funding pool, and I submit to the minister that it is imperative that these funds be accessed to address the problem of young people housed in aged care facilities. I am not sure about the allocation of these funds, so perhaps the minister can elucidate on that for me. However, if these funds are not available, why are they not, and what obligation is the Howard government taking on in contributing towards the 55 young people in Western Australia housed in aged care facilities? Also, what contribution is the federal government making towards the 86 people who have already been rehoused into more appropriate accommodation? In my view, this very vexed issue should be resolved by mutual agreement between the commonwealth and Western Australian governments, because it is an issue of a magnitude that requires cross-government support. I congratulate the Gallop Labor government, which has taken strong steps towards further supporting people with disabilities. Unfortunately, as with all public services, there is always more work to be done, but the Gallop government has gone to great lengths to introduce a number of budget initiatives as well as to increase the support and services available in the disability sector. However, a state government cannot and should not do this alone. Will the minister respond to my grievance by letting me know what he is doing to get these 55 young people out of aged care facilities? What is the commonwealth

government doing to support his efforts, and what can we do to support the minister in supporting our communities, which desperately need this inequitable issue redressed immediately?

MR R.C. KUCERA (Yokine - Minister for Disability Services) [9.39 am]: I thank the member for Swan Hills. I acknowledge Rob Taylor's situation; it is one that we are working on. He is one of those 55 young people who are currently in nursing homes in our state. I know that there will be generally strong and bilateral support in this house for this issue and essentially for disability issues generally. I look forward to calling on members opposite and harnessing their support so that we can negotiate a better deal for people with disabilities in this state. As the member for Swan Hills said, Western Australia is one of the few states that has a dedicated program to deal with the issue of young people with disabilities residing in nursing homes. The Young People in Nursing Homes program is targeted at people under 50 years of age who are in residential aged care. The program currently provides a range of accommodation options for 86 individuals, at a cost of around \$8 million a year. Only \$1.3 million of that comes from federal funding, with the remaining \$6.7 million supplied by the state government. The program is strictly dedicated and the priority for vacancies is absolutely quarantined to young people under 50 years of age who are suffering from a disability and who are currently housed in residential aged care, or those who are at risk of entering aged-care homes. Priority is determined by an independent priority assessment panel. We have put additional funding, under the Disability Services Commission's combined applications process, into the overall program.

Since 2001, the Gallop government has provided additional funding for accommodation support, totalling approximately \$19 million in recurrent expenditure. This includes state growth funding this year alone of some \$10.8 million. I emphasize that because it compares with a mere \$491 000 that has been dedicated to the program by the federal government. That is an enormous disparity. Despite achievements to date, 55 young people are still residing in nursing homes. We are working on this issue now and are determined to ensure that those people get into appropriate accommodation. Many of those people suffer from catastrophic injuries. Many of them, even at 18 and 19 years of age, have injuries that will keep them in high care for the rest of their lives. There is absolutely no reason that they should not be able to age in an appropriate place, regardless of their physical age, because in terms of their disabilities, unfortunately, nothing will ever change. We put this issue on the agenda at the conference of disability services ministers in Alice Springs some three weeks ago. Quite frankly, the federal Minister for Family and Community Services, Minister Patterson, simply handballed the issue to her colleague Hon Julie Bishop, the federal member for Curtin in this state. We have taken responsibility, however, on behalf of the Young People in Nursing Homes alliance to coordinate the national disability administrators' research and development program.

The innovative pooling fund mentioned by the member relocates young people with disabilities. However, we have raised serious concerns with the Howard government over this pool. In fact, in the two or three years that it has been in existence, only one state has accessed the program for three young women in, I think, Victoria who were removed from a nursing home facility there. The reason for the lack of access to that pool is that it offers only two years of funding. Why on earth would a family commit to two years of funding only to have the rug pulled from under it two years later and the young person returned to the facility from which he or she came? We have rejected the pool, as it is time-limited and requires the state to undertake full responsibility two years down the track for the recurrent accommodation support. That is, again, another cost shift on the part of the Howard government. It is essentially a program that denies not only these young people appropriate accommodation, but also a place in the sun for 55 people who should be housed appropriately in aged-care homes. More importantly, it will force the public hospital system down the track to accommodate 55 people in acute beds, when they should also be more appropriately housed. Nationally more than 6 000 people are being accommodated in this program. The consequences arising from continued placement are wide ranging and far reaching, and create not only financial and social implications but also psychological problems.

Frankly, the commonwealth continues to short-change us right across the board on disabilities. More importantly, the carers of people with disabilities are now being disadvantaged. During the life of the current state-territory disability agreement with the commonwealth, state funding will increase by more than 44 per cent. In fact, in this term of government there is a commitment to increase funding for disability services from state coffers by 73 per cent. This compares with a mere 25 per cent increase from the Howard government, particularly at a time when it has the capacity to do something for the most disadvantaged in our community. It is difficult to gauge, quite frankly, how genuine the Howard government's commitment is to people right across this state and, indeed, across the nation. The rhetoric that the federal government spouts about helping people with disabilities and providing them with opportunities to participate is breathtaking when it is measured against the facts. Actually the two successful programs and the support available to people with disabilities have been de-funded in this state. A total of \$77 000 for post-school options has been withdrawn - gone; \$84 500 to the people of the Goldfields Individual and Family Support Association has been withdrawn - gone!

People with disabilities and their families have had enough, and they will be asking politicians to walk a mile in their shoes on 13 September in Canberra. At the CASA - Committed About Securing Accommodation - meeting of people involved in accommodation support, I met with the carers from Western Australia who will be sending their own shoes to Canberra. As the member for Swan Hills mentioned, these changes to disability support pensions are also starting to impact. Reducing eligibility for pension education supplements and disability programs generally will only seek to create greater anxiety in the community. I call on the other side of the house to come with us on this issue and help us to support people with disabilities by lobbying each of their individual federal colleagues.