

HARDSHIP UTILITY GRANT SCHEME — BUNBURY SERVICE CENTRE

835. Mr D.T. PUNCH to the Minister for Community Services:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's commitment to supporting those who are facing financial hardship in our community.

- (1) Can the minister outline to the house how the new hardship utility grant scheme service centre in Bunbury will ensure a greater level of support for those applying for HUGS?
- (2) Can the minister advise the house how the service centre will provide more employment opportunities, particularly for those who have faced barriers to finding work?

Ms S.F. McGURK replied:

- (1)–(2) I am very happy to answer this question. I would particularly like to thank the member for Bunbury for the skillset that he brings to his role. He has a good understanding of the complex social issues that one of our regional centres is facing, but he also has some economic nous and understands that jobs and a good economy are the foundations of a good community as well. He is doing an excellent job. I thank him for representing me on Friday at the opening of the HUGS service centre in Bunbury. It will be operated by Anglicare on behalf of the Financial Counselling Network. It is the second service centre that we have opened. The other one is in Armadale.

We have put particular attention into not only making sure that the financial hardship fund has enough resources, but also that those funds go to the people who really need them. I was particularly concerned by the previous government—not only when it cut funding to financial counselling, which was a staggering decision to blithely cut funding in the metropolitan area to financial counselling, and, of course, it had to do a quick retreat from that position, but also when it decoupled financial counselling from HUGS grants. Under the previous arrangements, people had to get financial counselling —

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range!

Ms S.F. McGURK: People had to get financial counselling to make sure that they were given proper assistance.

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range!

Ms S.F. McGURK: Not being able to pay utilities is obviously not good, but it is a sign —

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range, I call you to order for the first time.

Ms S.F. McGURK: Could you be quiet, member for Darling Range? You might actually learn something about people who are experiencing hardship.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members!

Ms S.F. McGURK: In fact, we have learnt from the HUGS service centre in Armadale that 89 per cent of applicants who had contact with that centre were able to be referred to other support services such as more broad financial counselling, mental health practitioners, Foodbank emergency relief, and parenting and family support—89 per cent! People clearly have issues that they need other assistance with and those service centres are a fantastic opportunity to link them with other services. We are not only putting significant money into HUGS—nearly \$7.5 million in 2018–19—but also making sure that people have the proper expertise and assistance to get the support they need.

There is another bonus, which I know the member for Bunbury is well aware of. Anglicare WA, in staffing this HUGS service centre in the member's electorate, partnered with job network providers in Bunbury. It asked for applicants and made sure that those applicants had appropriate values and attitudes, a willingness and capacity to learn new skills, and, importantly, had empathy and respect for clients who make contact with the centre. As a result of the selection process, 12 candidates from the job provider network are now successfully undertaking a two-week induction and will then undertake a training program to work in the HUGS service centre. That is a fantastic outcome. We have good employment because we tapped into the job network provider and gave people secure employment. This is light-years away from the attitude we saw from the previous government and, frankly, still see from the opposition benches, with their understanding of disadvantage in our community.

It is complex. It requires empathy, it requires compassion and it requires a sophisticated response —

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! Member for Darling Range!

Ms S.F. McGURK: — if we are going to really overcome hardship for those people. I thank the member for Bunbury for his support of that centre in particular.