

CORONAVIRUS — AT-RISK YOUTH

477. Ms M.J. DAVIES to the Minister for Community Services:

I refer to the Department of Communities' presentation titled "Impact of COVID-19 on the WA community (Youth)" dated 29 May 2020, and specifically the statement that for close to a year the south west, great southern and wheatbelt have all had close to zero available youth crisis beds.

- (1) Does the minister agree that the economic impacts of COVID-19 facing our state and nation will see more people fall into homelessness?
- (2) Will the government fund more youth crisis beds in regional Western Australia in light of growing demand as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Ms S.F. McGURK replied:

- (1)–(2) One of the very challenging responsibilities that I have as a minister is to deal with homelessness throughout the state. Anyone who has been involved in this policy area, or even thinks about it for more than a minute, understands that this is a complex area to deal with. Often, it is a coming together of poor economic circumstances as well as personal circumstances, many of which are many years in the making. Overcoming the challenges to homelessness can be very difficult. No area is more tragic than youth at risk and those young people who are needing emergency supports, particularly those who are at risk of homelessness.

I understand the concerns of many regional members when they see high levels of youth unemployment that we are seeing around the country, including what we face in WA. It has been widely commented that it is an area of concern for us, but we are not alone in that challenge. Making sure that we have a good evidence base on which to draw when we consider our response is really important. Making sure that we prioritise any additional spends we are able to secure is also really important. That is why we took the better part of a year to develop, with the community services sector, a strategic approach to homelessness. In fact, I was taunted in this chamber on more than one occasion because we took so long to partner with the community services sector and the services sector, which knows that work and does that work every day.

We drew on the work of the University of Western Australia's Centre for Social Impact, which undertook a good analysis of the most up-to-date information not only of where homelessness is presenting throughout the state, but also what the evidence is showing us around the world. The result of that work was "All Paths Lead to a Home: Western Australia's 10-Year Strategy on Homelessness 2020–2030", and we backed up the homelessness strategy with a \$72 million funding commitment in December last year. In fact, we announced recently in Bunbury that we would bring forward some of the spending from that commitment so that we can start to implement the Housing First approach to the strategy, which is really the cornerstone of the strategy—that is, permanent accommodation for people, the right sorts of supports, and continuing to work with those people to keep them in accommodation. The international evidence is that is our best chance of giving people the best hope in life and overcoming their homelessness.

I will make two comments about youth homelessness. The first is that we have some good models in Western Australia through Foyer Oxford, for instance. If we give people support earlier, we are in a good position to steer them away from an ongoing life of welfare dependency and disadvantage. There is a very good success rate through Foyer Oxford. The state government put extra money into Foyer Oxford late last year, during Homelessness Week, to help support that model. The second comment I make is that jobs are the cornerstone of any good recovery. That is why jobs have continued to be a key mantra of this government since coming to office in 2017. There is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic is providing particular challenges to ongoing jobs. We heard today about the investment in roads being facilitated by the Minister for Transport. Planning reforms will free up opportunities for local builds to actually take place and get people employed on the ground, which will help stimulate employment.

I am sorry, member for Moore, if you find this a little tedious, but I am sure that at-risk youth and youth unemployment are of concern to most members. My point is that jobs are crucial and economic stimulation, for direct employment either in roads or in construction, is important for the flow-on industries that come from healthy regional economies. Having a good evidence-based approach to our homelessness strategy is also a priority for this government.

The SPEAKER: Can I remind ministers to make their answers quicker. We are battling to finish question time by 3.00 pm today, like we did yesterday.