

YIRIMAN PROJECT

Statement

HON SHELLEY ARCHER (Mining and Pastoral) [9.46 pm]: I would like to talk about a program that is available to Indigenous youth in the Kimberley. It is called the Yiriman Project. During my time as the member for the Mining and Pastoral Region, I have travelled extensively throughout the Kimberley region, visiting Indigenous communities and their corporations. One such organisation is the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre in Fitzroy Crossing; I will refer to this organisation as KALACC. Amongst the many other services offered by KALACC, there is one service that is in my view exceptional, considering the spotlight that has been cast on Indigenous youth and the problems they face. These problems have been highlighted in the coronial inquiries conducted by Alistair Hope. The program is a youth diversionary program known as the Yiriman Project. I hope that many members in this place have heard about this program during question time when I have asked the government about its support for the program. A number of ministers would have received funding requests from KALACC. Other members may have read some of the numerous media articles praising the program. For those who have not heard about the program, I will use this time to tell them about this great initiative.

The Yiriman Project was initiated by a respected Kimberley elder, Mr John Watson, and his son Anthony, who run the Jarlmadangah community. They saw a desperate need to provide Indigenous young people with the sense of direction and belonging that was lacking from their lives. The program draws on the combined efforts of elders from four different language groups who came together to identify ways to stop self-harm, suicide and alcohol and drug abuse amongst the Indigenous youth of the Kimberley. The program targets young Indigenous males with repeat offence records and young people identified as being at risk. This is done in partnership with the Department of Corrective Services. The objectives of Yiriman are twofold. The first objective is diversionary, through the immersion of young people in a cultural framework. The other objective is to build community relationships and capacity. At the centre of the program is the idea of returning to country. The Yiriman Project takes young people out to their country and talks to them. The elders share their stories around the campfire about their skin, their heritage, history, culture, country, bush tucker and bush medicine. The experience is designed to build respect for elders, pass on knowledge of culture, and encourage self respect by getting young people to understand themselves as part of the Indigenous culture, thereby giving them a sense of identity and belonging. The second phase of the program offers youth the opportunity to be involved in work-style activities such as leadership programs, ranger and land management programs, pastoral station activities, technical and further education programs, community projects and cultural education. Yiriman is a holistic program, governed by cultural decision making and cultural practices and owned by the Indigenous people. The program is delivered in partnership with drug and alcohol education centres and other services such as mental health. This partnership is particularly essential to ensure a holistic approach to help prevent the high-risk behaviour of Indigenous youth.

I chose to speak on this program tonight as I have just returned from a second coroner's inquiry into Indigenous suicide in the Kimberley. It is distressing to hear what is happening to our young Indigenous people. It appears to be happening on a continual basis. I make no apologies to this government when I say that it has failed the Indigenous youth of Western Australia. The number of suicides in Indigenous communities is absolutely shameful. It is heartbreaking to sit in the courts and listen to the stories of the families who have lost their young ones to suicide. The first coroner's inquest explored the reasons for the large number of suicides in the Kimberley in 2006. In that year there were 21 self-harm deaths in the Kimberley, an increase of over 100 per cent from the previous year. The coroner found that there was a high correlation between death by self-harm and alcohol or cannabis abuse. In 11 cases the blood alcohol level was in excess of 0.2 per cent. The coroner recognised that suicide is a form of distress. In his report into the reasons for the high number of Aboriginal suicides, he asked: why do so many Aboriginal persons in the Kimberley feel an intolerable intensity of psychological pain? The coroner found that alcohol abuse is both a cause and a result of many other problems for Indigenous people in the community. In particular, Alistair Hope referred to Aboriginal people in the Kimberley experiencing a shocking standard of living and suffering very poor health compared with other Western Australians. He found that these conditions were continuing to deteriorate.

The inquest further identified serious deficiencies in the current government responses to education and housing and called for immediate government action to address a complete lack of leadership in the Department of Indigenous Affairs. The second coroner's inquiry, which I attended for two days in Kununurra and a day at Oombulgurri, is looking into four suicides in Oombulgurri and a further death by car accident—all alcohol related. All of this revealed to me similar problems facing this community, as was found in those communities that were looked at in the first inquiry. There is a lack of education, housing is absolutely terrible and the alcohol

and drug problem in that community is absolutely appalling. Even though the services go out there on a continual basis, nothing is changing.

Housing conditions are appalling, there are alcohol issues, mental health problems, issues of child abuse and domestic violence, a lack of employment opportunities and literacy and numeracy problems for most of the residents in the Indigenous communities in the Kimberley, and in my view a general lack of care and understanding for the people in these communities from both the state and federal governments. There has been a small improvement in the community of Oombulgurri with the presence of police. By having a 24/7 presence, they are trying to work with the community to resolve its problems. In my view, not enough has been done to bring this community back from the brink of extinction. I agree that this community needs to accept some of the responsibility for its issues and problems, but I also believe that it cannot be done without a whole-of-government approach and cooperation by all parties involved.

In 2001 the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Hon Alan Carpenter, was presented with a briefing paper entitled "Working Together". The paper was prepared by the Aboriginal Suicide Prevention Steering Committee as a proposal for a policy framework and work plan to address early determinants of self-harm and suicide among Aboriginal youth in Western Australia. The paper warns about increasing suicide rates and states that, on the basis of current trends, the rate of suicide among Aboriginal people can be expected to increase further unless there is concerted community and government action at all levels to address both the immediate and the underlying causes. It appears that this prediction has been realised. Western Australia now has one of the highest rates of suicide and detention of young Indigenous people in Australia.

The "Working Together" paper was prepared by Indigenous people for Indigenous people. It is based on extensive community consultation and contains a wide-ranging number of options for prevention of self-harm and suicide. These are community-determined solutions that must be considered by government and supported. Within the list of intervention strategies are repeated calls for programs that value Indigenous culture, reconnect Indigenous people to spirit and identity, address alcohol and drug use, mentor and expose communities to positive role models, develop life skills and real job prospects, recognise customary law, and create alternatives to custody; for example, diversionary programs. All these strategies that I have mentioned are embedded within the Yiriman program, yet this program has not received any significant funding support or recognition from either the state or commonwealth government. This is despite the program being the subject of numerous academic papers heralding its innovation and success in winning a number of awards.

I implore the state and federal governments to act immediately and fund this distinguished program that has proven time and again to offer youth at risk something other than a life of crime, drugs and alcohol and the horrors that come with such a destructive lifestyle and, in the end, for some, suicide.