

DISABILITY SERVICES — RESPITE CARE — KIMBERLEY

Grievance

MS J. FARRER (Kimberley) [9.41 am]: My grievance is to the Minister for Disability Services, and concerns the lack of support and respite services for parents and families of children with special needs in the Kimberley. I have received representations from a number of parents concerned about cuts to their funding and lack of respite service in the Kimberley. Under the Disability Services Commission, funding is allocated to the Kimberley Individual and Family Support Association, KIFSA, for respite care to assist the primary carer and their immediate family to take a break from their caring role, but many families have seen a reduction in this funding or are unable to access this limited service.

I recently received a letter from Ms Roxanne Birch clearly outlining her experience with cuts to her son's funding and the lack of an available respite service. She says —

In 2012/2013 my funding was cut by \$1100 due to my son being in a certain age group. This financial year 2013/2014 my funding is cut by \$1312. In the letter I received, it states that the funds are available to me “under the same arrangement.”

I'm a single parent with no help from families or agencies when it comes to respite. My son's disabilities has him abusing me physically to the point where I have to ring the police and/or our local GP. I have to drive 200kms twice a week for family support. Sometimes we don't get there due to my son's meltdowns, which happens quite regularly as Kununurra KIFSA staff would verify this. When I get a chance whilst I'm in Kununurra, I try and catch up with other families who have a family member with disabilities.

The letter further reads —

So yesterday I caught up with a family member who receives the Brokered Respite Funding. He brought up the subject of how they're going to spend their funding of \$1250 a quarter while I get to spend \$875 a quarter! I was shocked as I thought all families were cut back.

Roxanne goes on to talk about some of the hardships she has faced since her son finished full-time schooling. Due to a lack of any facilities in the Kimberley, she has no option but to become his full-time carer. Since her son completed school in 2008, she has had to cease all employment to provide full care for her son. In 2011, he was also diagnosed with severe depression and started harming himself physically. There are not sufficient agencies or organisations to cater for those who require respite care from the 18 to 40-year-old group in the Kimberley region. Therefore, Roxanne has faced these difficulties largely on her own. I acknowledge that there is one house in Broome that caters for this type of care, but it has a waiting list also and is simply not accessible for those in the central or East Kimberley region.

Roxanne went on to say —

The small amount of respite funding that I have received, I have put that towards a holiday for both myself and my son as I don't have a carer or place for my son to attend whilst I have a break. I know that he's my son and he's my responsibility but all I'm asking for is a break by myself to revive & relax even if it's only for a weekend.

I know that Roxanne is not the only family member or carer in the Kimberley who is experiencing these issues and who needs a little respite. The pressures and strain on many Kimberley families are immense due to the lack of these services. Roxanne's letter is just one of many that I have received from families struggling with the lack of respite services, and I know that this is a difficult issue for those in remote communities also.

I also know of the experience of a young girl from one of the outer communities of Halls Creek who did not have any family members. She was on her own, and she needed a lot of support. She was cared for by different members of the community, but sometimes people move around a lot and it reached the stage at which she was just left on her own. She was picked up one day by one of the nurses from the Aboriginal Medical Service and taken into Halls Creek, where she was also placed in what they call the “old people's home”. It is not a place for somebody who has such disabilities, but she was placed in there. Sometimes such people do get very aggressive, and she started doing all sorts of things: her behaviour pattern changed, and she was doing the wrong thing. Disability Services staff asked for her to be taken out of that home because of the trouble she had caused through whatever she had done there.

I was told that she was placed in a hotel with a person who was caring for her. She spent the weekend in a hotel while Disability Services in the Kimberley were looking for a placement for her. After the weekend, she was brought down to Broome and placed there for a little while—I think for a couple of weeks. She was taken back up north again to Halls Creek and sent to another old people's home in Warmun. As long as I can remember, she

has been there for this whole length of time. These are the sorts of things that people always talk about when they say they want respite accommodation to be put up to support some of these families. I do not know what is happening with her now, but probably when I go back I will have a look.

I respectfully request the minister's urgent consideration of this issue, as it is an important issue for a lot of us up there. I think that we can do much better to ensure a better quality of life for these children who are now progressing through to becoming adults and for their families or carers across the Kimberley.

MS A.R. MITCHELL (Kingsley — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.47 am]: I thank the member for Kimberley for raising this matter in the grievance today. It is certainly an issue that the Minister for Disability Services is aware of. It is a matter that has not been fully addressed yet. Certainly, similar situations are brought to our attention not only in the Kimberley, but also in many other parts of regional and remote Western Australia that we must look into. I am sure members are aware that Hon Helen Morton visited East Kimberley early in September this year. She spent time with many families and many people who are experiencing difficulties and challenges because not many services or options are available. Unfortunately, I cannot respond specifically to the people the member has mentioned today as I do not have that information, but I can certainly look into some of those matters on her behalf to see what is available. However, I am happy to talk more generally.

The member raised the issue of young people between the ages of 18 and 40 years who are being placed in an old people's home. I agree that they do not belong in these homes. There is a severe lack of work opportunities and living arrangements that I know the Disability Services Commission is very keen to address. One of the things that I was most impressed about when I first met DSC staff was their approach to having people with disabilities live in accommodation suitable for them and to providing suitable support.

I know we have not achieved everything we set out to do. The member mentioned that there is one place in Broome for respite. Five houses were built in regional Western Australia, but only one was in the Kimberley. The member is right: it is a long way between Kununurra and Broome; it is not just down the road. Therefore, it is a start but we are not completely there yet.

When the minister was in the Kimberley, as I said, she spent a lot of time with people. The minister also went to Wyndham, but she did not get to Halls Creek and I am sure that will be on her agenda very soon. The people she met raised the issue of the distances they are expected to travel to get respite and support. A wonderful disability services coordinator in Kununurra, with her staff, is doing the best she can, but there are limited opportunities that she can use. The number of people who seek opportunities for respite is increasing and we have to see what is the best we can do for everybody.

The Disability Services Commission funds two agencies to provide people with services for their family. As the member mentioned, some people arrange their own respite and support and others use facilities that are available to them. Another 10 people have individual plans. That is the variation that occurs within the system; it is not simply one amount to satisfy everybody. I think that a relationship needs to be built up with the disability services coordinator to determine how that assessment was made and what they sought to achieve within that. I can also let the member know that two senior commission officers will travel to East Kimberley in the first week of December to assist in looking at what can be done in that area. They have set project time lines that they have to work within to make sure that they get information back to the director general of Disability Services.

The member mentioned the Kimberley Individual and Family Support Association. I am aware, as the member may also be aware, that the association has written to the Minister for Regional Development requesting royalties for regions funding to purchase some possible accessible accommodation—a unit from a decommissioned village in East Kimberley—and relocate that to its current site in Kununurra. However, before that can occur, a fair bit of planning needs to go ahead, certainly within local government and the Department of Housing. That process is part of the work that the two commission officers and other staff are looking at to determine whether it is possible and whether there is funding for that accessible accommodation into Kununurra.

There are recommendations for expanding respite capacity in East Kimberley. As I said, the two senior commission officers will have that task. They will get back to the director general to ensure that we are looking at the opportunities and options that are available and how we can best develop some of those services and respite facilities in East Kimberley, rather than expecting people to, as the member said, travel a long way from their family support network. Yes, those families need respite and the carers need a break, but they also do not want to be too far away. Moving people out of their area can disorientate them quite a bit, which does not help with their fitting in and making the most of that respite opportunity for their carer.

The issues that the member for Kimberley raised are valid. The minister is very cognisant of the issues facing East Kimberley. As I said, although she understands these issues, in her visit there she was made very much aware of them by the personal experiences that were relayed to her. Because of that, I think the member will find

that there is a commitment by the minister to improve the services and respite opportunities for people with disability, particularly in the 18 to 40 years age group. That age group is very real and one that they are looking at to achieve improvement. I thank the member for Kimberley for raising this grievance with us today and we will certainly look into these matters for her and keep her informed of the progress.