

COMMUNITIES — INDIGENOUS PSYCHOLOGICAL SERVICES REPORT

123. Ms M.J. DAVIES to the Minister for Child Protection:

I refer to the Indigenous Psychological Services report authored by Dr Tracy Westerman, AM, received by the Department of Communities in October 2019. Does the minister stand by the comments she made yesterday in Parliament that the findings of the report, that there is widescale and endemic racism in the Department of Communities, is a ludicrous proposition and that she continues to reject them?

Ms S.F. McGURK replied:

I began my response yesterday by saying that I thought that the Department of Communities was taking more decisive action to better understand how it can respond and work with Aboriginal people, communities and representative organisations and, in fact, better serve its own Aboriginal workforce than many private and public agencies by asking difficult questions about its own cultural competence, if you like. That is the first point. It is way ahead of the game in asking these difficult questions.

I venture to say that if most organisations within Australia, whether they are public sector organisations or private sector organisations, asked themselves about their cultural competence, many of those organisations would probably be found to be wanting. We are on a journey to better understand and appreciate the very rich legacy that we have in this country as one of the oldest continuing cultures in the world and how we work with that. That was what I think about the Department of Communities commissioning this work.

The IPS report authored by Dr Westerman took a sample of 295 people out of about 6 000 employees and looked at their cultural competence. Those people as a representative group were found to be wanting. She also carried out a survey of Aboriginal people within the organisation. From my recollection, none of them said that they felt culturally secure. That says that the Department of Communities has a long way to go to properly understand the Aboriginal communities that they are working with—the Aboriginal families and the individuals but also their representative organisations. That is a challenge across the state. Things are very different in rural and remote areas compared with metropolitan areas. From memory, I venture to say that out of the 295 people who were surveyed about their cultural competence, 26 of those were Aboriginal and fewer than 10 per cent of those Aboriginal people were found to be culturally competent. Even within certain language groups, the point is that Aboriginal people could improve their cultural awareness amongst different language groups and cultures. That is important to appreciate. Just because someone is Aboriginal, they may not fully appreciate issues that are going on in the Aboriginal community.

There is a lot of work to do. The IPS report was certainly challenging and confronting for the department but I think it was well received and began a piece of work within the department to improve its structural response. Now we have an Aboriginal outcomes division within the agency and an Aboriginal woman, assistant director general Cheryl Smith, leading up that division. The department is also doing a range of other things to start to work to improve the cultural competence of its staff. That is within the agency itself. External to its work, we are doing a whole lot of things, both within my portfolio and with the other four ministers who have responsibility within the department, most particularly the Minister for Housing, but in all areas, to improve outcomes for Aboriginal people.

It is not the case that the report was commissioned and then received and then gathered dust, as the member for Vasse described it yesterday. It has informed change and a journey within the department to improve Aboriginal outcomes. We are actually starting to see some results in very, very difficult areas, particularly in child protection, but also some of the feeder issues like domestic violence and homelessness that were challenged with regard to Aboriginal disadvantage.