

YOUTH DIGITAL INCLUSION PROJECT

740. Ms E. HAMILTON to the Minister for Youth:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's \$5.5 billion recovery plan that includes support for young Western Australians who may have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Can the minister outline to the house what this government's investment in the youth digital inclusion project will mean for young, vulnerable Western Australians and their access to the support services they need?

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

I thank the member for Joondalup for the question and for the hard work that she puts in representing the young people of her electorate.

Throughout the pandemic, a lot of sections of the community were hit hard. Of course, one of those sections was young people. When we look at the impact on employment, we see that is the cohort most significantly affected. But it is not just in employment; the impact on young people in areas such as mental health has been quite significant. One of the issues that has made it more difficult for young people to access the services they need is that when the pandemic first hit, many youth services' shopfronts were forced to closed, and those services moved to online delivery. For a lot of young people, online delivery is not difficult because they are used to living in that environment. But for disadvantaged youth particularly, who may not have a mobile device or who, when they run out of data, would ordinarily go to a library to access the online world, a lot of those opportunities ceased to exist.

As part of the pandemic response, the government put together a youth task force. We asked the Youth Affairs Council of Western Australia, which participated, what our key responses should be for disadvantaged young people. One of the ideas YACWA put forward—I want to thank the council and CEO Ross Wortham, in particular, for their contribution—was a program to get repurposed digital devices, whether mobile phones, laptops or tablets, into the hands of disadvantaged young people. We worked with the Office of Digital Government—as Minister for Innovation and ICT, that was a great collaboration—and put together the youth digital inclusion project. Through some relatively modest funding of about \$160 000, that will see up to 300 refurbished devices made available to service providers to put into the hands of young people selected as needing them the most. Those devices come with six months' worth of free data. It means that young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who would otherwise not be able to access youth services online can do so through this program. It was a great collaboration between the Office of Digital Government and the youth services sector. It is just one example of how this government has taken a nuanced approach to this pandemic.

I give a shout-out to the Hello Initiative. It is a similar program run by a not-for-profit in conjunction with Total Green Recycling. It provided repurposed devices to young people in the justice system who would otherwise have found it difficult to maintain contact with service providers. It put together a similar program. I understand that by June it had provided about 60 devices to young people.

The other initiative that came out of the youth task force, again put forward by the Youth Affairs Council, was the idea of a live dashboard so that young people could go to one place to see what youth services are available to them. Again, it was a modest investment of about \$20 000 and delivered by the Youth Affairs Council of WA. It was another way of ensuring that during the pandemic young people could readily access the services that they need.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I want to draw the house's attention to the document "Digital Inclusion in Western Australia: A Blueprint for a Digitally-inclusive State", which is now out for public consultation. Members on this side of the house see the opportunities that the digital economy provides. In so many ways, it can improve the lives of Western Australians and solve real-life problems. But it would be naive to think that all Western Australians will be able to access digital services in the same way. The concept of the digital divide is very real. Members of this side of the house are determined to do what they can to narrow the digital divide. We have put out—again it was put together by the Office of Digital Government—a draft digital inclusion blueprint that outlines a number of initiatives we think could be progressed in order to narrow that digital divide as much as possible. It is currently out for consultation. We have had so much interest that we have extended the consultation period to the end of October. I invite members of the house who are interested in dealing with this important issue, especially during this pandemic, to look at that draft document.