

WATER CORPORATION — HARDSHIP UTILITY GRANT SCHEME

**155. Mr D.J. KELLY to the Minister for Water:**

I refer to the answers given by the minister in this house and the other place that reveal that in 2014, for the first time, over 1 000 Western Australians were forced to apply under the hardship utility grant scheme for assistance to pay their water bills, in 2013–14 a record number of 423 000 Western Australians paid record amounts of penalty interest on late water bills, and last year a record number of 2 279 Western Australians had their water restricted because of the non-payment of bills.

- (1) Will the minister acknowledge that the massive increases in water bills put in place by this government are causing real pain for Western Australian families?
- (2) Will she take action to stop growing numbers of Western Australian families having their water supply reduced to a trickle?
- (3) Will she guarantee that the three six per cent annual water increases foreshadowed in the budget will now not go ahead?

**Ms M.J. DAVIES replied:**

I thank the member for the question.

- (1)–(3) There were three parts to the question and they related to access to the hardship utility grant scheme, penalty interest and restrictions. Members will understand that the Water Corporation does not want anyone to get to the point at which penalties apply to their bills, and the organisation has a raft of things in place to assist customers to pay their bills. We have put the increase in the number of applications to HUGS down to the fact that the government has recognised that vulnerable people in the community require assistance and has made it easier for them to apply for grants. We have made it more accessible as they no longer need to see a financial counsellor before they access HUGS. There has been an increase because we have made it easier for people to access HUGS so that the most vulnerable in our community are looked after.

In relation to penalty interest and restrictions, last month the member was reported in the media talking about a huge percentage of customers who had had their water restricted. The Water Corporation puts this in place as a very last resort. It is a small number out of the two million customers who are serviced by the Water Corporation every day. As the provider of an essential service, the Water Corporation will not—I would never condone it—turn off the water. If customers refuse to engage with the Water Corporation to make sure that they can pay their bill or because they are under pressure, it will trigger a water restriction. They will still be able to flush the toilet and have a shower —

**Mr D.J. Kelly** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Bassendean!

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Warnbro!

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** Absolutely not, member. If people contact the Water Corporation, penalty interest will not be applied to their bill. They can make a dollar-for-dollar payment to pay down their bill if they get into trouble and they can access programs such as HUGS. There is a suite of things in the organisation and across government that supports the vulnerable people in our community. The Water Corporation applies the restrictions only if people refuse to engage with it, but water will still come out of the tap. If they engage with the organisation, the water will be turned back up to its normal pressure. I might add that this is done for only 10 days. Normally, when that happens, the customer contacts the organisation and the water pressure is resumed and they start working through a payment process.

The member has been making vexatious claims that this is an enormous amount of the customer base. It is not. It is a small percentage of the two million customers serviced by the Water Corporation every day.

**Mr P. Papalia** interjected.

**The SPEAKER:** Member for Warnbro, I call you to order for the second time.

**Ms M.J. DAVIES:** We will continue to support the most vulnerable people in our community. I would say to anyone who has concerns about, or is having trouble paying, their water bill that the Water Corporation offers flexible payment options and there are support services and that they should contact the Water Corporation as

soon as they get themselves into trouble. We are not about turning off people's water and we are not about penalising them. The corporation does not want to get to that point.