

CORONAVIRUS — REGIONAL AREAS

Statement

HON DIANE EVERS (South West) [9.45 pm]: Understanding the need to support the entire state of Western Australia during the very difficult times ahead of us, I would like to speak for the regional areas. With only one-quarter of our state population in the regional areas, I sometimes worry that services and stimulus packages will focus on the urban areas, where service delivery is easier.

A first step that I would suggest is to make substantial grant funding easily available to community sector services across the state to deliver support for our most vulnerable people—for homelessness, domestic violence, mental health, emergency relief, disability support and other services on the front line. These organisations can develop place-based responses that are applicable to the needs of their communities. Small rural community organisations can respond quickly and easily to the needs of their communities. I was in Balingup over the weekend. We talked about the virus, what will happen when it occurs and people start to self-isolate, and how difficult that might be for some people who may not have much connection with the outside world. I was really impressed when a young man said it would not be a problem in Balingup because they would look after each other. I thought that was a really nice statement to make, but it made me worry about what might happen on suburban streets where people do not really know each other and might not know that an elderly person is stuck in their home. The idea is to support the small groups—the ones that get out and deliver the services on the front line, particularly in regional areas where they know the people. That would absolutely help the situation in those areas. A range of these organisations could spread the delivery and share the responsibility. They could draw in many different volunteers, and, when people are assisted, those people are more able to volunteer their time or skills in other ways. Some funds might be distributed through local governments that support charitable enterprises such as Meals on Wheels and Foodbank WA, or that support the medical practices in their communities, as often occurs in some of our more remote areas.

In addition, there are many performance artists throughout regional communities, as well as in Perth and surrounding suburbs, and many of these people have just had a big hit to their potential income. A grant program of some sort would be valuable in keeping performance art as a part of our culture. We may not be able to have large groups meeting, but we still need music, dance and dramatic performances to entertain and lift the spirits of the greater population. It is something that we should think about.

We must also give intense consideration to how the state will manage to protect remote communities, where many people are susceptible to the more serious side of this virus. An infection in those communities, with their reduced medical facilities, could have devastating effects. Is it possible to consider a 14-day isolation period for people entering the remote communities of the Pilbara or Kimberley regions?

More broadly, we need to look after our homeless people. If we are interested in infrastructure spending to stimulate the economy, there is no better investment than social and affordable housing for people who do not have a home. Prefabricated homes can be built in regional areas using plantation pine and industries can be developed for the fit-out and installation. We know it would be a benefit to those people. This problem is coming and we need to do something about it. In addition, farming communities will need a workforce as the steady stream of backpackers we once had dries up. If we think broadly about the emerging and potentially devastating impacts on our communities and their economies, we could address many of the issues before the full impact hits us. We just have to plan ahead. Immediate steps could be taken to address the serious health risks we face by ignoring our homelessness issue. Numerous shops and offices stand vacant while people sleep on the streets. A quick fit-out could make these places acceptable accommodation and give people the opportunity for self-isolation if necessary, or at least allow for social distancing. We just have to think ahead and work out what we can do now to avoid some of the problems that will be coming.

We must consider the people who are in precarious situations, and give them every opportunity to maintain their health by providing resources for them to self-isolate if required, even if this means providing a payment to carry them through or pausing payments for utilities or licensing. Tasmania has introduced such a payment for people who must self-isolate, which at least takes the pressure off that person to not have to continue to go out and earn an income when they should be at home, keeping themselves away from other people.

This current health crisis is scary for many people. Strange things are happening, and each day brings more change. Western Australia is in a strong financial position to vastly reduce the impacts of this pandemic. Regional Western Australia, in particular, is in an even more precarious position as the medical facilities are not always available and employment options are more limited and more likely to be in tourism, hospitality or the arts—industries in which many of the huge cuts have already occurred.

I appreciate what has been started by the government to try to address these issues, but I see that much more needs to be done and done quickly. We need to look at what other countries are doing, what has worked and what has

not worked, and basically put all our efforts full steam ahead to try to address these issues before we see the devastating outcomes in Western Australia that we are beginning to see overseas.