

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS — THE KIMBERLEY

Grievance

MS J. FARRER (Kimberley) [9.07 am]: This morning my grievance is to the Minister for Community Services. I am extremely concerned about the future of early childhood education, childcare, child and maternal health and family services in the Kimberley. The children and family centres located in Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing and Kununurra are under threat of closure at the end of the year because this government refuses to provide support, resources and funding for their continuation. The Wyndham Early Learning Activity Centre is also being ignored by this government. Similar to the children and family centres, WELA provides vital services for Wyndham and its surrounding communities. I have written to ministers about this issue and I have raised WELA's ongoing funding issues in previous grievances, yet nothing has been done by the government. WELA must be recognised by the government as an essential program for Kimberley children and their families. If this program discontinues, there is absolutely nothing to replace it.

For many years it has been identified that Kimberley early childhood development, health and education require more focus and investment. The previous commonwealth government provided funding for the development of the children and family centres in the Kimberley through the Indigenous Early Childhood Development National Partnership. The previous commonwealth government also provided funding for the development of a new building for the Wyndham Early Learning Activity Centre. It seems that the current government is choosing to walk away from these fantastic centres rather than utilise them and capitalise on their value and potential to benefit the Kimberley.

I had the honour of opening the centres in Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing in 2013 and the centre in Kununurra in 2014. They are fantastic new facilities that the communities have gratefully utilised and now rely on. This makes me feel even more disappointed that there is such uncertainty around the continuation of these great initiatives. I know that it would be extremely detrimental to the Kimberley if these centres were forced to close. I am very alarmed that funding has not been secured beyond 31 December 2014 to ensure the long-term continuation of the centres, which have proven their worth and importance by delivering exceptional programs and services to so many children and their families. These centres not only are early learning service providers in a natural capacity, but also have created a safe environment for community members to come together and flourish, removing longstanding family tensions and hostility. They have achieved great social and emotional benefits for whole communities—for everyone, not just Aboriginal kids. Further, I believe WELA and the family and children centres have greatly assisted in improving the health and wellbeing of many children and mothers in the area. They provide a great stepping stone for children before starting kindy. I emphasise the importance of these highly successful programs for our young Kimberley children and their families. If we are to see improvements in Aboriginal disadvantage, health and education in the Kimberley, it is essential that the state government supports these types of positive initiatives. As the member for Kimberley, I request that the minister commits long-term funding to WELA and the family and children centres located in Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing and Kununurra. I further request that the government considers funding the centres as if they were child and parent centres, so that they can continue their great work in my electorate.

I have here a poster done by the children of the Fitzroy Crossing community centre that they would like me to present to the minister.

MR A.J. SIMPSON (Darling Range — Minister for Community Services) [9.12 am]: I thank the member for Kimberley for her grievance this morning on this very important issue. The member pointed out that the Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing centres opened in 2013. In July this year, I was with the member at the opening of the Kununurra children and family centre. The member was right when she spoke about the commonwealth government's partnership in building these centres. This is an area that we have tried to develop. The member pointed out that this is an early childhood process in which we are trying to work with families and their children early to develop their skills in child care and the four-year-old programs, to get them well established before they go to primary school. It is clear that this program is trying to establish a connection at a very early age between children and schools. The centre in Kununurra is on or near a primary school and that location is part of the process of trying to establish a connection at a very young age between children and their families and school.

The government is very much aware of the funding situation for the Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Kununurra children and family centres. The children and family centres were established under the commonwealth government's National Partnership Agreement on Indigenous Early Childhood Development and \$42.35 million was budgeted to build and service five centres in Western Australia from 2008 through to July this year. The Western Australian government provided land for the centres and the Department of Education managed the implementation of the programs within these centres. All the centres are operated by non-government organisations procured by the Department of Education. The three children and family centres

in the Kimberley are at Halls Creek, Fitzroy Crossing and Kununurra. I note that the Halls Creek and Fitzroy Crossing children and family centres provide childcare services as well. The centres provide an integrated service including childcare, early learning, parenting support and child and maternal health programs and services for Aboriginal families.

The commonwealth government has not committed to funding the centres beyond 30 June 2014. However, as was pointed out by the member, I understand that the Department of Education has stepped in to extend funding until 31 December 2014. The Department of Local Government and Communities does not fund any child or family services in the three locations. Its responsibilities are confined to regulatory oversight of the early childhood centres in these communities, in line with the implementation of the National Quality Framework. A couple of programs are run through the centres. The Reading Recovery program is delivered by the Department of Education. I have requested that the Department of Local Government and Communities in conjunction with the Department of Education investigate possible alternative funding sources for the children and family centres.

I think it is important to understand that we are trying to work out how we can fund these centres and identify a model that they come under. The Minister for Health has informed me that the Department of Health is helping out the centre in Wyndham to ensure that we can keep that centre operating. Importantly, we need to go back through the business model and look at the services the centres provide and do an analysis of how much they are being used. We know, as the member pointed out very clearly, that 31 December is coming fast and there is no commitment to funding the centres past that date. I give the member the commitment that I will work with the Minister for Education to try to source more funding and ensure that we can keep these programs and facilities operating in our communities.

Mrs M.H. Roberts: Isn't this is a problem in a lot of communities?

Mr A.J. SIMPSON: Member, it is a problem. The federal government is in the process of establishing partnership agreements. In my own department there is a national partnership on seniors, the Youth Connect program and of course the Municipal and Essential Services Programme funding. It is an issue for us; it is now on the state government's plate and we will have to work out how we can fund that. It is important that we ensure that we service the areas where there is a need; there is unmet need in the Kimberley and we have to ensure we can meet that need.

The funding for the centres from July to December this year is coming through the Department of Education. I give the commitment that I will work with the Minister for Education to try to find a way to fund the buildings that provide the services to the community. They are fantastic facilities. I was very impressed with the centre that we opened in Kununurra in July. It is a fantastic childcare centre that has great interaction with the community as a whole. It is on Department of Education land and has a connection with the school. It is a service that is used by not only Aboriginal families but all families and it is an important part of developing our communities and families. We are trying to intervene early and work with parents and families to engage children at a young age, especially those under four years of age, through the four-year-old program that leads into primary school.

I thank the community very much for the painting. I very much appreciate the time and effort it has put into it. I acknowledge the member for Kimberley's advocacy on this issue that is very important to her community. I give the commitment that I will work with the Minister for Education to try to find a solution to the funding problem to ensure that we can keep the centres open and providing services to the community.