

HARDSHIP UTILITY GRANT SCHEME

951. Mrs J.M.C. STOJKOVSKI to the Minister for Community Services:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's ongoing commitment to supporting those facing financial hardship in our community, which was demonstrated by this government's decision to restore funding for financial counsellors. Can the minister update the house on the hardship utility grant scheme service and how it is supporting Western Australians?

Ms S.F. McGURK replied:

This is a really positive story in Western Australia, where we have now put extra money into the hardship utility grant scheme—an extra \$3.5 million—to make sure those who need assistance will get it. What the Treasurer announced in the last budget was a program to make sure that those who were non-concession card holders would go via an assessment scheme, and that would essentially be financial counsellors who would be set up to have a closer look at what their request was. Of course under the previous government, we had a cutting of financial counselling and the request for HUGS going directly to the utilities. So the announcement of the HUGS service centre, which is a call centre that has been set up —

The SPEAKER: Members! Member for Warren–Blackwood, if you want to have a meeting, go outside, please.

Ms S.F. McGURK: The call centre has been set up to evaluate applications by non-concession card holders. The financial counselling network, which runs the service centre, is 15 organisations that have come together to provide financial counselling in the metropolitan area. The call centre has 19 financial support workers. That was launched in July. At the end of October, the centre had assessed over 1 400 applications across an average bill of \$896. A total of 1 345 of those applications were recommended to receive HUGS, and 69 were not accepted. What is important is that 1 100 of those people who applied to the call centre were also given referrals to other services. So this is a really good opportunity to give people financial assistance and to assist them —

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

Ms S.F. McGURK: —unlike the other side, unlike the Liberal–National government, which cut funding for financial counselling.

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range!

Ms S.F. McGURK: As I said, 1 100 referrals were made to other services, including mental health services, legal services, employment services and health-related services.

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range, I call you for the first time.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I did notice that yesterday in question time, the Leader of the Opposition referred to Anglicare's 2018 report on poverty and wanted to make a point about how the McGowan government was faring. It was pointed out to me that in 2015, when the Leader of the Opposition was the Treasurer under the then Liberal–National government, Anglicare's report, "Who is Being Left Behind?", specifically outlined the damaging impact that his government had when it decided to cut financial counselling.

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range!

Ms S.F. McGURK: I just thought I would remind people of what Anglicare's report said in 2015. It told the story of a single mum, Jane, who had been in an abusive relationship and had a mental illness. She relied on Anglicare's financial counselling services. The report in 2015 said —

These kinds of specialist responses take a long time to establish. Building the expertise, creating links within the community and understanding individual needs only happens over time.

I am quoting Anglicare's 2015 report. It continues —

When funds are removed it can be devastating because services cannot be reinstated overnight.

This is why the Western Australian State Government's decision —

That is the decision made when the Leader of the Opposition was Treasurer —

to axe the funding to financial counselling services is so puzzling.

It states also —

Anglicare WA is deeply concerned about the consequences for people like Jane and her baby. In times of such fiscal severity, a safety net to catch vulnerable families before they fall into poverty is needed more than ever. This is not the time to unravel it.

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range!

Ms S.F. McGURK: Of course the McGowan government put the services back for financial counselling through the financial counselling network.

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range, I call you to order for the second time.

Ms S.F. McGURK: I was also interested to hear that the Leader of the Opposition wants to go out and visit the network. Now that they are in opposition, they want to go out and visit the network to see how they are operating. Do members think they are concerned about people who are in financial hardship?

Mrs A.K. Hayden interjected.

The SPEAKER: Member for Darling Range, I call you to order for the third time.

Ms S.F. McGURK: Do members think they are interested to learn how those services are offering advice and assistance? I do not know. I think they might be more interested in their own political misfortune rather than the misfortune of struggling Western Australians.