

**CORONAVIRUS — HOMELESSNESS SERVICES — BUNBURY**

*Grievance*

**MR D.T. PUNCH (Bunbury)** [9.26 am]: My grievance is to Hon Simone McGurk in her capacity as Minister for Community Services. I would like to start by thanking the minister for not only taking this grievance but also her passion and commitment to supporting the most vulnerable people in our community, and the community services sector generally.

The restrictions resulting from COVID-19 have highlighted how many people in Bunbury are sleeping on the streets, and the role that support services have played with practical support in helping people to find shelter. Support services, like the InTown Centre, can no longer allow people to congregate at their premises for lunch and advice. Caravan parks and camping grounds are shut down to new visitors, and we have witnessed a growing tent city at the Graham Bricknell Music Shell and the old railway station in the central business district. As more places close, the difficulties for people who have to sleep in the open are exacerbated. Many of these difficulties magnify other problems, including managing personal belongings, health, medication, personal safety and food, and even simple things like finding phone recharge outlets for those who still have a phone and need it to access support services that have switched to telephone contact only. These matters cannot be pre-planned; the pandemic came upon us, we had to respond, and then suddenly we find that all these little things make such a difference to people's lives.

The pandemic has demonstrated the significant number of people sleeping on the streets in Bunbury, and that has been shocking for many people who have been confronted with that visible, tangible evidence of vulnerable people within our community. It is important that I commend the services working to support people who are experiencing homelessness, and I recognise their efforts during this especially difficult time. I have been advised that in the quarter leading up to the end of March, more than 120 people were accommodated by various support services in Bunbury and the south west. That is a pretty significant effort by those agencies, and we do not often see that because we focus on the visible evidence of people who actually do not have a home.

I met recently with Mr John Sproule and Dee from the Salvation Army. They are absolutely front line workers supporting the people sleeping on our streets. I cannot speak highly enough of John and the work he is doing. With very limited funds, he helps with food and some emergency and crisis accommodation, and he talks with people and listens to their stories, which is often the most important starting point. He visits the music shell daily to check on the wellbeing of people and look for new ways to help. John is being active and proactive, but he cannot stretch his resources any further. He has some fantastic ideas for solutions, but as an individual working for a not-for-profit charity organisation, no matter how much he wants to do more, he has just about reached the limit of how much he can assist. There is only so much we can ask of an individual.

Despite being a volunteer service, the Bunbury Soup Van manages to maintain a regular service, providing a warm evening meal at least once a week. This continued even when its own volunteers were self-isolating and staying home to protect their own health, and there was a great deal of fear in our community about the pandemic. It is true that the number of rounds it does each week has reduced, but the service has remained regular and something that people without a home can rely on. Accordwest is a homelessness services provider in Bunbury. It takes on some of the most difficult to house tenants. It provides housing and support for recently released prisoners and safe environments for children at risk. I have met many of the employees of Accordwest; they are proud of the work they do and the difference they make in our community, but the scale of the problem is becoming overwhelming. Without new approaches and resources, it is very difficult for Accordwest as an agency to make inroads into ways in which people could achieve secure accommodation. Doors Wide Open provides support to people experiencing meth addiction, and their families. It has always recognised the co-existence of substance abuse and homelessness amongst its clients, but this pandemic has truly brought home the extent of the problem. Many people who previously couch surfed or stayed at caravan parks are now out of options and have joined the ranks of those who are sleeping in the open at the shell. Rather than Doors Wide Open saying that this is beyond its funded scope, it has looked at what it can do to help, and has called for donations for care packages to support people.

These and many other community service organisations need help to continue making a difference in the lives of people who are living on the streets in my community. They need the opportunity to share their experiences and be encouraged to be part of the solution for Bunbury as a whole. I have spoken to volunteers and staff associated with all of these organisations and their frustrations are clear. They support not just people who are without a home, but also people who are at risk of losing their home. These organisations see that people are falling through the cracks but they are not being given the local professional leadership and support that they need to tackle the problem in a coordinated way. As a consequence, they feel overwhelmed.

With the dreadfully low level of payment from sources such as JobSeeker and several disability support pensions, this problem will grow. While the federal government refuses to address a long-term solution to inadequate income support, more people will look to the non-government sector for help. People do not have the resources to secure

and maintain private tenancies and there is not enough social housing to go around. I am concerned that when the JobSeeker payment reverts to its historically low level in September, more people in my community will be living in cars and on the streets. These payments might be established federally, but the impact of their inadequacy is felt at state and local levels, with much of the burden borne by the not-for-profit sector and community volunteers. In a sense, the savings that the federal government is pursuing in its welfare budget are translated into costs for non-government organisations.

I ask the minister to look at how, in a growing city such as Bunbury, we can design solutions to help people. I also ask that she meet with the key providers of help in Bunbury to map out a pathway forward, so that they can get behind it and sort this problem out. We must also keep pressure on the federal government to adequately address income support so that people can achieve their human needs for adequate food and housing. I thank the minister for receiving my grievance.

**MS S.F. McGURK (Fremantle — Minister for Child Protection)** [9.33 am]: I thank the member for raising this issue with me today. Since coming to Parliament, he has been a strong advocate for the people of Bunbury as their representative, and I thank him for his constructive approach in bringing this issue to my attention. As the member pointed out, homelessness is a complex community issue that has been exacerbated by the challenges that we have all had to confront during the COVID-19 crisis. In many cases, this crisis has been particularly hard for people who are sleeping rough or have precarious accommodation options. Of course, as the member pointed out, that has often pushed people out from options that they might have had for couch surfing or taking up a spare room for a time. There has been concern, and those people have been pushed out. In addition, some services have closed, such as some food supports, which has placed extra pressure on these people.

As I have spoken about before in this place, each year the Department of Communities provides over \$90 million to not-for-profit services around the state to provide special homelessness services. These services assist families, women and children affected by family and domestic violence, young people and single adults who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. Many of these services, including the services the member referenced in his electorate, provide critical services to the community despite all the challenges that are thrown at them. I acknowledge that despite government investment, the existing homelessness services system does not always offer effective responses, and in challenging times, such as those we find ourselves in, it can crack under the additional pressure. I also acknowledge that homelessness and rough sleeping is a significant issue in the member's electorate and the south west generally, and that the current situation is causing frustration and distress for many within the local community. I think the local media has picked up on the extra visibility of these people. As the member raised with me, the closure of caravan parks and the like has pushed people out and made their disadvantage very visible to the local community.

I am pleased to say that, at a local level, the Department of Communities' south west office is working with other groups on a project to identify and mobilise support for people who are experiencing or are at high risk of experiencing homelessness. The project is being coordinated across multiple agencies, including the Department of Communities; the South West Aboriginal Medical Service; the WA Country Health Service; Accordwest, which the member mentioned; the City of Bunbury; and local community advocates, some of which the member referenced in his speech. I am pleased to inform the member that the group has already completed a census of known rough sleepers in Bunbury, Margaret River and the south west. The census data for Bunbury indicated that approximately 80 individuals were couch surfing or sleeping rough in the member's electorate. Many were also experiencing issues around family and domestic violence, mental health, substance misuse or interaction with the justice and child protection systems. This comes as no surprise to many people who are working in this field. This project group will work on an integrated planning approach to pool resources. It will use skilled human service workers to engage with people who are homeless and refer them and other agencies to the supports that are so needed. Importantly, outreach work by local community service groups to support this action commenced earlier this month.

In recognition that the pooling of existing resources and coordination of approaches will go only so far, the McGowan government created the Lotterywest COVID-19 relief fund. The \$159 million COVID-19 relief fund will provide support for organisations that help people who are experiencing hardship. An initial \$59 million will be available for crisis and emergency support for eligible not-for-profit and community organisations to assist with costs associated with an increased demand for food, clothing, shelter and other critical needs. If they have not done so already, I urge the member to make sure that the organisations that he spoke to, and is very well connected with, are aware of that application process. The funding will be delivered in rounds, and if one round has finished, there will be other rounds available. We need to make sure that those organisations reach out for that assistance. These grants are beginning to roll out across the community and will have a big impact in supporting organisations that assist vulnerable people.

Significant work has also been happening across government in conjunction with the community services sector to distribute information and advice and put plans in place to respond to the health pandemic, should the situation worsen. Communities has created several task forces to respond to the impact of the pandemic on vulnerable

cohorts, including a homelessness task force, which will do this work and track emerging issues to assist those cohorts. Plans are currently in place to ensure emergency accommodation and support is available for rough sleepers should they contract COVID-19 and need to self-isolate while they await test results or recover from the virus. Thankfully, due to the efforts of Western Australians and the very strong response of the McGowan government in WA, we are in a very different position than was anticipated only two months ago. The stream of new cases of COVID-19 has slowed to a trickle and there is no evidence of community transmission.

Although I acknowledge the need to consider innovative solutions to house and support vulnerable people during COVID-19, it is important that this work is consistent with a broader strategic direction that will produce long-term outcomes. I understand the City of Bunbury has recently provided funding to install lockers and construct temporary outdoor shelters. That is important, but we know that this is about managing the problem rather than solving it. We announced late last year that there would be \$72 million in new funding for additional homelessness services to support people who are sleeping rough in the community. An amount of \$34.5 million will go to the Housing First initiative with a view to ending homelessness in Western Australia.