

HARDSHIP UTILITY GRANT SCHEME

492. Mr R.S. LOVE to the Minister for Community Services:

I refer to media reports that more than half of the annual hardship utility grant scheme budget has already been expended by this government since the government so cruelly hiked up electricity charges in this state. Will the minister be using her position in cabinet to argue against further increases in household bills, as has been threatened by the Treasurer and the Premier, or will the minister argue to cut some of Labor's extravagant election promises?

Ms S.F. McGURK replied:

I find it extraordinary that the opposition would raise the question of the hardship utility grant scheme and its record in relation to HUGS and financial counselling, because of course it was their side that cut financial counselling in the metropolitan area and put enormous pressures on all those households that need assistance in managing their bills. There was a public outcry, rightly, about the cuts to financial counselling, and as a result of that outcry, half of the money in the metro area was put back in by the member's side.

We, of course, understand that it is important to give people support at an early stage when they need it. So we committed to reinstate the full allocation of financial counselling, and the budget handed down by the Treasurer did just that. We also acknowledged that in the economic climate that the former government left us to manage, particularly the record high unemployment that they left us to manage, there was significant hardship in the community and we needed to ensure there was extra money in HUGS. So, the last state budget did a few things. We committed to provide funding for extra financial counselling. That was delivered. We put more money into HUGS. That was delivered. People who live south of the twenty-sixth parallel are now able to access a maximum of \$580 a year, up from \$530 a year, and people who live north of the twenty-sixth parallel are now able to access \$962 a year, up from \$891 a year. We increased the maximum amount per year that people can access.

We also said that people who do not have a commonwealth Health Care Card need to get financial counselling. People who have a commonwealth Health Care Card can access the utility scheme directly. I agree it is of concern the number of people who are accessing HUGS and financial counselling. We are very aware of that. We are working across the agencies, as well as with the community sector, to make sure that people are getting assistance when they need it.