

HOMELESSNESS

567. Mrs L.M. O'MALLEY to the Minister for Community Services:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's commitment to do everything it can to reduce homelessness and support those who are sleeping rough. Can the minister outline to the house how the 20 Lives 20 Homes program in Fremantle will help those who are homeless find permanent housing and support, and can the minister advise how this will build on the work the government is already undertaking to tackle this issue?

Ms S.F. McGURK replied:

It is interesting to hear of the opposition's sudden awareness of homelessness. I have been minister now for two and a half years and in just the last six weeks or so—the last couple of months—the opposition has started to ask questions and understand that homelessness is a problem in our community. It has been a problem for some time. It was certainly a problem when members opposite were in government, even if they did not do that much about it. It is one thing to talk about homelessness and raise one's hands and say that we should do something about it and that more needs to be done; it is another thing to actually come up with practical, constructive, evidence-based solutions that understand that there are as many underlying reasons that people are homeless as there are people who are experiencing homelessness in all its different forms. It exists throughout the state. It does not exist just in the CBD; it exists in metropolitan centres, regional centres, rural areas and remote Western Australia. It affects many demographics. It affects young people. Despite the demonisation and characterisation of all homeless people as perhaps being addicted to meth, the leading cause of homelessness amongst women is domestic violence. Members opposite need to understand, and perhaps show a bit of compassion for, why people might be experiencing homelessness, as well as come up with constructive solutions. That is something that has certainly exercised my mind when I have looked at different approaches throughout the state.

For instance, the housing first approach is being led by Ruah Community Services. Importantly, Ruah has developed a cooperative relationship with more than 20 mostly not-for-profit organisations to deliver the 50 Lives 50 Homes project. An independent evaluation found that over the three years the project has been implemented in Perth, 88 per cent of the people the program has housed have been in that accommodation for those three years. This has been a significant outcome for those people; they are still in housing three years later. Something like 147 people have been housed. That program targets the street present, the most vulnerable homeless people, and is getting long-term results. That is happening because those people are being given the right sort of accommodation and are targeted with the supports they need for as long as they need them, including access to 24-hour support. It is using an evidence-based approach.

I have heard the opposition talk about this issue over the last six weeks or so, but I have not heard one constructive comment or one practical solution for what should be done about homelessness. I know that there is a problem in Fremantle with street-present people—with homelessness. It is not as terrifying as the member for Cottesloe might lead us to think, but it is a problem. I understand that it is a problem, most importantly, for those people who are experiencing homelessness, but it is also bad for businesses, which I know are struggling. I introduced Ruah, St Patrick's Community Support Centre and the housing first approach to some local businesses nearly 12 months ago. As a result of doing that hard work of getting people together and talking about a local solution, I was very proud to stand alongside business leaders, and particularly the managing director of Sirona Capital, which is doing the Kings Square development. He has raised, from local Fremantle businesses and wider afield, \$1 million towards a two-year project. The local council is providing support. The Department of Communities, through the Minister for Health and his portfolio, is contributing nearly \$400 000 to that project, which will have the innovation of providing a rental subsidy for private rentals, so that there is the right sort of availability of support for housing when people need it. We are getting wraparound supports for those people through St Pat's and Ruah. Fremantle 20 Lives 20 Homes is a \$1.4 million project. It is now funded for two years. The vast majority of that funding has come from private businesses, which are prepared to help when we can give them the right model that will provide sustained long-term benefits. There is not one sector of government or one group in the community that will solve this; it is going to be done together, by collaboration. The local government and the state government are involved. I wish the federal government would pull its weight. It has a role to play, too. The business community is prepared to step up. The service providers are doing a fantastic job. I thank those in the Fremantle community who have been part of that project, and I look forward to the results.

When the Leader of the Opposition was asked in an interview on 6PR on 15 July about what should happen with regard to homelessness, she had one suggestion: she said that we actually need a task force to look at homelessness. She said, "We should bring all the not-for-profit agencies together. Get the government agencies and bring them together and put a strategy in place to address this problem." That was the Leader of the Opposition's solution. In fact, that was the former government's solution in 2013 when it said that it would have a plan to address homelessness. The Leader of the Opposition was harking back a little to when she was in government. In 2016, three years later, the former Liberal government published its plan to address homelessness. It was a snapshot of

its role in homelessness policy, current services and future directions. That is what it managed to do in three years—just announce what it was already doing, which was nothing. The Leader of the Opposition says that we should have a plan. That is exactly what we have been doing over the last year. The Leader of the Opposition might want to listen to this, because we have been doing that work with the head of the Western Australian Council of Social Service. The chief executive officer of Ruah, Deb Zanella, has been working with the director general of the Department of Communities on a whole-of-government approach and strategy for homelessness—exactly as the Leader of the Opposition proposed. Perhaps that is a little more constructive than the Leader of the Opposition's contribution in August 2015, when she said that she did not know why those people who are homeless in the CBD did not get themselves organised. She said —

“The accommodation is there, the support services are there, the not-for-profit groups are there, the money's flowing into the system,” she said.

“Clearly if there's homeless people sleeping on King Street, those people aren't doing their jobs properly.”

The Leader of the Opposition said that the service sector was not doing its job properly. That is the extent of the Leader of the Opposition's understanding—she blames the not-for-profits and says that we need a strategy and a plan. In fact, that is exactly what we are doing. We are working on evidence-based solutions and putting them in place where we can. We are addressing the underlying problems that lead to homelessness, such as job creation, methamphetamine supply and demand, and domestic violence, which are underpinning problems that lead to homelessness.