

POLICE — STAFF

Matter of Public Interest

THE SPEAKER (Mrs M.H. Roberts) informed the Assembly that she was in receipt within the prescribed time of a letter from the Leader of the Liberal Party seeking to debate a matter of public interest.

[In compliance with standing orders, at least five members rose in their places.]

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Order, please! Leader of the Liberal Party, maybe just pause for one brief moment so that those people moving out of the chamber can move and then I will give you the call to move the motion.

MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Leader of the Liberal Party) [2.51 pm]: I move —

That this house calls for the Minister for Police to address the impacts of poor morale and challenges facing WA police men and women, and be honest about the lagging police numbers.

We in the opposition certainly —

Point of Order

Mr P.J. RUNDLE: I seriously cannot hear the Leader of the Liberal Party, thank you.

The SPEAKER: Yes. There are some —

Ms M.M. Quirk interjected.

The SPEAKER: Points of order are heard in silence, member for Landsdale; you of all people know that. Sitting next to the member for Landsdale is of course the culprit as to why we had to have a point of order called in the first place—the member for Swan Hills, who thought her interjection was so amusing she said it twice!

Debate Resumed

Ms L. METTAM: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am sure she may be able to speak to this motion as well.

We on this side of the house, the opposition, are big advocates and supporters of the Western Australia Police Force. It is clear that WA police are increasingly doing it tough under the McGowan Labor government. It is not providing enough support for them. Day after day we hear reports and concerns from WA police officers who do not feel that this government has their back.

Although we hear the government talk up crime rates in Western Australia as being on the improve, the government is quite selective. Violent crime rates are 13.9 per cent above the five-year average, or about 17 per cent since the government came to office in 2017. Family offence rates have gone up 34.9 per cent. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, WA has the highest rates of family and domestic violence-related offences against females recorded across all the states, with 1 254 assaults reported to police per 100 000 females in 2021.

There is no doubt that the complexity of the environment that WA police officers are working in is more challenging than ever. Crime severity has soared in the Perth CBD and regional WA. I refer to the crime severity figures that also paint that picture. The WA Police Union's crime severity score, which reflects the relative harm of offences, points to these sorts of felonies going up over the 10-year average. There are big increases in the Pilbara at 31.2 per cent, goldfields-Esperance at 35.5 per cent, midwest-Gascoyne at 45 per cent and the Kimberley at 96 per cent. There was also an increase in the Perth CBD.

What we see on the ground, and what we as an opposition are very concerned about, is the exodus of police leaving the force. Police are leaving the force at three times the average. There were 473 resignations last year, which is, as I said, about three times the normal 150 resignations. This is the highest number in its 189-year history. We see significant issues of poor morale, which other members will talk about.

The government's response and its spin are the reasons we are specifically asking for it to be honest when it comes to these figures. It was pointed out in the 2020–21 budget that with the allocated additional funding for recruitment to match the commitment of 950 additional officers, some funding was attached for an additional 800 officers to boost the community's safety, bringing the total number of additional officers in the budget to 950. But the state of the sector report for 2020–21 highlighted that Western Australia had 6 958 sworn officers, and a year later in 2021–22 it had 7 154 sworn officers, which is an increase of 196 officers. That is a long way short of the 950 officers that this government had promised. This indicates that the government has a lot of work to do.

What we have seen, and it has been previously raised by the opposition in this place and publicly, is that the government has moved the goalposts when it comes to this commitment. It backdated the commitment made in 2020–21 as if it were a commitment from March 2017. That is just complete spin. It potentially looks like another broken election commitment with about 200 officers up from that 2020–21 figure. This side of the house believes that the government needs to do more to ensure that we retain and support WA police officers.

Today there was a story in *The West Australian* about the additional challenges that WA police face. It pointed to the WA Police Union's figures, presented through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, that showed that although the number of mental health transport presentations by police or prison staff to WA hospitals had dropped, they were basically waiting significantly longer at those hospitals. In fact, there were about 6 000 hours of ramping. WA police officers sign up to do a job, but it is quite clear that they face increasing challenges under this government. It is estimated that police officers spent 6 141 hours waiting with patients to be seen last year, which was more than double the time spent eight years ago. This obviously reflects not only a failure in the lack of support in our hospital and health system—we are aware of the medical tasks that police officers had to undertake during the COVID pandemic as well—but also the significant challenges that police officers are facing under this government's watch. They are voting with their feet. They are leaving the force in droves as a result.

We saw an example of where the minister's priorities lie on the issues with WA police. He is very much focused on tough talk and photo opportunities. It was extraordinary that taxpayer funds were used for a \$8 500 media stunt that resulted in concerns raised by police officers, the Special Air Service and the RAAF. This media stunt demonstration about banning a particular rifle shut down RAAF airspace. As I said, concern was raised that it was dangerous.

The opposition supports the Western Australian Police Union's Switch Off Duty campaign. As I said, other members will talk about the morale issues of police officers that we are hearing about. The need for officers to be able to disconnect from regular calls, texts and emails certainly makes a lot of sense given the increasing pressures, mental health challenges and anxiety associated with the tough job of policing. We see more severe issues with significant increases in family and domestic violence and other challenges that police face with a government that is not listening to their concerns.

Again, earlier this week, we heard on Monday reports of another case of the ramming of a police vehicle during a police pursuit at 3.20 in the morning as police tried to pull over a Toyota Hilux. Fortunately, officers were not injured on this occasion. WA police recently revealed that 54 officers were injured during police car ramming incidents between January 2018 and 31 January 2023. This is a significant issue for WA police. This government has sat on its hands when it comes to addressing this very real concern. A report was published in February 2021 all about this matter. The National Motor Vehicle Theft Reduction Council report titled *Use of a stolen motor vehicle as a weapon: The offence of ramming a police vehicle* made specific recommendations, back in 2021, about the value of having a specific offence for ramming. Other states have taken the lead in this regard, such as Victoria and the Australian Capital Territory, but we have heard and seen the WA government continue to ignore this issue. WA police have raised equipment and upskilling requirements for their officers. We believe that the adoption of dash cams in police vehicles could lead to better outcomes in road safety for our police officers as well. Other states such as New South Wales and Tasmania invest and support police in this way.

I had the benefit of visiting Leonora, Laverton and Kalgoorlie recently. I heard the very real concerns of those communities, including from the local police, about the impact of the removal of the cashless debit card—a move by the federal Labor government. I asked a question in this place to the Premier about the significant spike in violence in these communities. People just want to be heard. We heard from elders who were asking for the reintroduction of the cashless debit card, or something similar, given the alcohol-fuelled violence, the out-of-control crime and the fact kids effectively are going hungry. It is really disappointing that the Premier just brushed that off as an election commitment of federal Labor.

Although a financial commitment was made by the federal Labor government, I believe it falls short of properly addressing these very real concerns we heard on the ground in those communities. Over the last 12 months, there has been a 60 per cent increase in violent crime in Kalgoorlie, 22 per cent in Laverton and 32 per cent in Leonora. I would imagine that the issues have been much more significant. We heard from ambulance officers, police and community members absolutely desperate to be heard by this government. Minister Ellery of the other place was asked at a recent press conference about the very real issues in Leonora and Laverton regarding the removal of the cashless debit card, and she said that these were state-related issues. It seems government members certainly do not all have the same view on that. It is quite distressing. Those WA police on the ground need better support to be able to deal with those very real issues in Leonora, Laverton and Kalgoorlie.

More broadly, we call on the government to address the impacts of poor morale across the WA Police Force and address the challenges that WA policemen and policewomen face so that more local officers do not leave the force in such numbers.

MR P.J. RUNDLE (Roe — Deputy Leader of the Opposition) [3.06 pm]: I rise to support the motion that was moved by the Leader of the Liberal Party —

That this house calls for the Minister for Police to address the impacts of poor morale and challenges facing WA police men and women, and be honest about the lagging police numbers.

As the Leader of the Liberal Party said, we very much support our police, both metropolitan and regional. They do a great job under trying circumstances. From my perspective, the Minister for Police needs to have a think about trying to keep the police we have in the force rather than losing them and trying to gather police from the other side of the world. We have seen the campaign by the police minister. The campaign cost \$300 000 to try to steal police officers from the other side of the world when the minister needs to keep police officers in Western Australia in their job. We are losing those police through lack of morale and a lot of other aspects.

I saw on the news a couple of times the police minister over in the United Kingdom standing outside some sort of gatehouse, whether it was near Downing Street or Westminster, saying, “Come on; come over and live in WA! Come join the police force over in WA.” I think as a minister of the Crown, he needs to have a little bit more of an organised campaign than him being seen to do that. That was a little concerning from my perspective. As I said, it cost \$300 000. If and when we get these police officers over here, where are they going to live? That is the challenge. Housing is one aspect.

Retirements and resignations are happening time after time. According to the Western Australian Police Union, 465 police officers resigned and 97 police officers retired from the WA police in 2022. In November alone, there were 128 resignations, and in February, the shadow police minister highlighted figures revealed in Parliament that 61 officers resigned between 1 January and 14 February 2023. These are the highest numbers of resignations and retirements in the agency’s history of 189 years, as indicated in a media statement from the WA Police Union on 16 January 2023. The union said that the likelihood of the McGowan government keeping its promise of 950 sworn officers by 2024 cannot be believed. The minister has said we will keep our officers and bring in another 900 or so from the UK. Where will they actually live?

This issue is amplified in our regional areas, where we have not only a record number of police leaving the force, but also a breakdown of behaviour in our regional centres. Members such as the member for North West Central have brought this up time and again. Now we have the prospect of our police being rammed. We know what goes on on TikTok and all these other things. The opposition has been calling for some legislation on that. These conditions are not acceptable. Right now, police are busy protecting themselves because they lack the resources to bring the rest of the issues into line with society’s expectations.

It was interesting to read some of the comments from police auxiliary officers in the *Police News*. They feel that they are overworked, underappreciated and underpaid. That is the constant message to this government. Quite frankly, it sounds like our teachers and nurses. It seems to be a recurring theme of this government that all our public service people, who are doing their best, are underappreciated, overworked and definitely underpaid. It was interesting talking about housing because the minister made a flippant remark when asked where the overseas officers were going to live. He said —

... we’re building 30 000 homes ...

“But I’m also hoping that a lot of people on these planes are going to be builders, so they’ll help us start solving the problem.”

How can we take it seriously when we hear comments like that? The refusal to admit fault after six years at the helm is unacceptable.

I will talk about the Government Regional Officers’ Housing scheme. The scheme is just not able to support and house regional police officers at the moment. How exactly does the state plan to house 850 to 900 more officers—I would be interested to hear from the minister about that—plus the new trainees the government keeps reminding us are entering the workforce? The Liberal–National government continued the GROH scheme. That scheme was the key and we continued to develop it and increase the GROH stock. We provided a minimum of 500 new affordable homes by establishing the housing stock redevelopment strategy. That was delivered by 30 June 2016. I restate my comments from 14 February 2020 in this house —

Since July last year, these are the headlines of the WA Police Union’s media statements: “Human resources powering police exodus, not resources sector”, “Perth prices up more in one year than police pay in five years”, “Assaults on cops at 10-year peak...violent crime at all-time high”, “Police vote to reject pay offer”, “Record no. of police resignations and retirements”, “WA Police Union releases report on suicide by police officers in Australia” and “Ramming police cars”. In just seven months, the media statements say it all. Our police force is struggling.

I want to quote from an article published in *The West Australian* by retired police officer Greg Smithers on 21 January 2023. Greg Smithers was a police officer for 35 years. His comments sum up the acute crisis in our WA Police Force and the mass resignation of police officers. In the opening paragraph, Mr Smithers commented on the challenges faced by our police force, including new recruits. He is quoted as saying —

Apart from continually being assaulted, abused and ridiculed for doing their job, they are also bogged down in a mountain of paperwork and red tape justifying their actions.

Mr Smithers commented on the responsibility of police having to deal with matters they are not trained for, such as truants, members of the public with disabilities and psychological issues, children at risk and domestic violence matters. That sums it all up. We have the challenge of not only the resignations because police are currently not being looked after, but also the housing issue, which is amplified in our regional areas. According to the great resignation document from the police union, which states all these issues, 76.8 per cent of police are dissatisfied with the WA Police Force management and culture, 37.6 per cent are dissatisfied with the long working hours and/or high workload, 33.6 per cent are dissatisfied with the lack of career development or promotional opportunities, and the list goes on. One final article I would like to quote from is from *Police News* regarding regional tenure and states —

“More options for officers to stay in regional towns if they’ve set up their lives and families in those towns. Provide actual support to officers who are involved in critical situations, not just five minutes of lip service.”

The previous government improved those allowances, made those conditions better and provided better housing in regional areas. This government is not good enough and this minister needs to do better.

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition) [3.15 pm]: I rise to also add my support for this excellent motion from the member for Vasse —

That this house calls for the Minister for Police to address the impacts of poor morale and challenges facing WA police men and women, and be honest about lagging police numbers.

It is timely that the Minister for Health has just returned to the chamber because I will talk to a recent issue that has surfaced regarding some of those pressures on the police that may be impacting their morale and is increasingly facing Western Australian police men and women. I refer to the situation that has developed around ramping of police at our hospitals. We have all heard of ambulance ramping. We know that under this government St John Ambulance ramping has increased from around 340 hours per month to nearly 7 000 hours per month at its peak. What we have not known is that there has been a corresponding rise in the number of hours our police officers have been ramped at hospitals when they are there with people who present with mental health issues. The police keep a watch on those people while they wait to be assessed and perhaps admitted or treated at the hospital. A recent report from Shannon Hampton highlighted that police spent an estimated 6 141 hours waiting with patients to be seen in 2021–22, which is more than double the time spent eight years ago. That is an awful lot of police time for those officers to spend making up for the shortfalls and failures of this government to deliver in the health sector.

We are seeing the compounding issues the government is allowing to run through our community. We have heard from the member for Roe about the housing issues and from the member for Vasse, when she started this discussion, of the failures of police in the areas that she highlighted. Now we are seeing hospital ramping emerge as yet another pressure on police when they do their job. It is part of the police force’s role to take charge when a person is in mental distress and needs treatment, but it is not part of their role to spend hours and hours at a hospital waiting for someone to address the situation. In this report is a quote from the acting president of the Western Australian Police Union of Workers, Paul Gale, who said that the data showed police were —

... “using our policing resources in a health space, and of course, that harms our delivery service to the community from a policing perspective”.

It goes on to say —

“We understand that part of our policing requirements are looking after vulnerable people, but whilst we’ve got vehicles parked outside hospitals waiting for a vulnerable person to be assessed, that vehicle is being prohibited from being actually able to do police work,” ...

We have the compounding situation of a shortage of police and mass resignations of police. I think the member for Roe said that 473 or 475 had resigned last year. There have been reports of shortages of police across many regions. That issue has been raised here and denied by the minister, but there are still ongoing reports of vacancies in the midwest, the Gascoyne, the goldfields and the Kimberley. Probably at least 60 officers in those regions are not on the job because we cannot get people to fill the roles and because police are resigning and retiring and are in short number. The member for Roe highlighted the bizarre situation of our Minister for Police parading around the United Kingdom instead of ensuring that the police on the ground here are properly supported and given the morale-boosting support they need from the minister and the force.

We saw an article by Caitlyn Rintoul on 25 March, last Saturday, regarding the number of police seeking mental health support. I urge anybody who needs to seek mental health support to do so. I am not in any way suggesting that police should not be doing that. They should be seeking that support if it is required. But a report that says there was a 27 per cent jump, from 2 691 people recorded in 2021 to 1 659 in 2022, which is a significant amount, means that the number of police seeking mental health support has quadrupled in four years, which would indicate,

would it not, that there is an issue? It would indicate that there is a problem and it is being denied by this minister. He is not accepting that there is a problem with morale and retention of officers if police need to seek that level of mental health support. I encourage anyone who needs it to seek that support, and I am not in any way suggesting they should not, but it certainly points to police being under stress and pressure. Police doing their job are being hunted down and rammed by people in LandCruisers. We see them being targeted in all sorts of ways. We know that violent crime is rising throughout the community and especially in regional areas. Violent crime is out of control in some regions. I have read some of these statistics before in this place, but I keep reminding people of the difference between regional areas and city areas with some of the worst crimes. Per 100 000 people, we have 0.9 homicides in the city and 4.8 in regional areas. It is a disgrace.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Police) [3.22 pm]: I thank the members opposite for moving this motion because I agree that as Minister for Police, I should always be focused on doing whatever is possible in my role to support police and boost morale, to ensure that they have necessary supports and to attract and retain police officers. That is what I do every day. I will try to get to some of the things that members raised, noting that a number of different matters were addressed.

The member for Vasse led the contribution from the other side. With respect to a couple of things that were said, firstly, I guess the thing I can talk about is police numbers. To place it on the record—this is a fact, not something that has just been claimed—the headcount in the Western Australia Police Force today is 7 141. Just before we came to office on 28 February 2017, it was 6 732. That is 409 more police officers in Western Australia than when we came to office, which is six per cent growth. It is the most police officers there have ever been in the Western Australia Police Force. That is a fact. As the member indicated, we have committed to growing the police force even further by record numbers, and we have funded the police to achieve that. At the moment, right now, at the academy training, for local police recruits under training, there are 172 officers. I am anticipating that I will go to a graduation very soon, perhaps next month, of one of the biggest graduations in recent times. I think they are anticipating something like three squads all at once.

With regard to local applicants, this is to confirm, despite the member's disparaging observation, member for Roe, regarding my efforts in the United Kingdom, as I think I have said in response to this sort of a motion before, I asked the Western Australia Police Force a couple of years ago to consider preparing for campaigns to attract police officers from elsewhere. Even when I first took this role, we could see what was happening; the pool of potential applicants was diminishing as unemployment was going down and the participation rate in WA was increasing. It was always going to be a challenge to get all that we wanted from local applicants. But I can tell the member, right now, 2 004 Western Australians have applied to join the Western Australia Police Force—right now today.

Also with regard to the member's disparaging observations about—I was quite hurt—some of my social media antics to get the word out, we achieved an extraordinary cut through in that mission to the UK, far in excess of what we possibly would have been able to achieve had we been paying for advertising to attract people to Western Australia like the It's Like No Other website. That website has links to every sector in the state for government and non-government to help people in the resources sector, hospitality sector, Motor Trade Association of Western Australia—all those people.

I would speculate that we achieved millions of dollars' worth of free advertising. One thing, *Good Morning Britain*, on which we have now had two segments worth probably about 10 minutes in total of free advertising, essentially, when we referred repeatedly to that website, is watched on a daily basis by four million Britons. I know it was working because on the day that I had that imagery taken of me being cheeky outside Downing Street, I also walked down Whitehall—this was the first day we arrived—and walked up to a couple of coppers, armed police officers who stand between horse guards. Members might know how they have the two horse guards that are ceremonial so they are guarded by armed police. The name of the very first police officer I spoke to in the UK was Zach. I walked up to him and asked whether I could speak to him because I was concerned they have a job to do. He said yes. I told him I was there from Western Australia to offer him a job. Zach said, "I know. I have already applied." The reason I know that worked is because a week before we went there, we pre-empted with a range of measures to get ourselves in the media and alert the British public and the media to the impending mission. Then when we hit with the mission, we doubled-down and got a lot of live activity across all media, so newspapers and radio and television; it was not only big TV but also all the local regional ones that we passed by. That was a significant effort.

I can tell the member that the latest number of international applicants is 1 019. To be one of those applicants from the UK, any of those Home Office-supervised police forces that we are targeting, so the top tier, or the Garda in Ireland, they had to have done at least three years' service. They are not just kids off the street. We are talking about experienced officers with the capacity to come here and do a transition course at the Police Academy, which is about half the length of the normal course. As I understand it, the first of those officers will arrive around September.

Regarding the member's observations about me outside Downing Street, I was a little cheeky. I can tell the member that last time I looked, post our promotion, there were about 8 500 individual visits to the site for the construction

industry and the website tells people about how to look for a job and how to come to Western Australia. Not all of them will arrive at once—this was said but it did not necessarily get reported—they will arrive in stages, as will all the people who come to Australia and Western Australia in coming years in response to our skilled labour promotion to fulfil our skilled workforce needs.

Under the COVID recovery first home owners grant scheme, 30 000 houses are under construction in Western Australia. My dad lives on his own in Burekup so I go down to visit him most Saturdays or Sundays, depending on which day I am working. About 16 houses in that little town are part of that package and are slab down and construction commenced. This is my gauge or metre of how the delivery is going; those houses were stagnant for a long time—that is true—with the big disruptions that happened post-COVID with the war in the Ukraine and disruptions to the supply chain. They are moving now; I am talking about a number of them. I would say that at last count, at least six of them are occupied and it looks like another four or five are nearing completion. I anticipate that that is a bellwether, an indicator for the rest of the state, because Burekup is a little country town—it is not Bunbury or Kalgoorlie—and it is difficult to get builders there, particularly the subbies who are in demand. They are moving along. I anticipate—I am an optimist—that a lot of the 30 000 houses will come online in the next six months, but definitely within the next 12 months, unless there is some other great disruption that we cannot foresee. That means that the people who are currently waiting to get into those houses—the first home buyers—will move out of rentals, potentially, and they will become available. I acknowledge that it is a challenge, but it is a challenge that confronts every jurisdiction in this country. I saw on the front page of *The Australian* yesterday that over the next two years, the federal government is anticipating the biggest migration growth in history—and that is across the country. I would not be surprised if Western Australia attracts a lot of them because there is so much opportunity here.

That aside, things are looking good with recruiting. Not only are there more than 2 000 local applicants, the police have established a recruiting centre. If members go down Hay Street past the 6PR building to the east towards the WACA, on the corner they will see a dedicated recruiting centre—the first of its kind in my time. It has great signage all over the windows. It is staffed by police officers so people have an opportunity to talk to somebody about the job. As the member would know, we have open days at the academy and we will continue to do those. There is a lot of great continued promotion around the Let's Join Forces campaign. When the Dockers have their First Responders Day, the police have a promotion of the police force as a career path. It is successful; it is working, because there are a lot of people coming. I will do everything I can to retain them.

I think I said last time to the member for Vasse that she gave me too much credit by saying that I had the potential to impact morale either way, positive or negative. I appreciate her comments; they were very flattering. If we rely on the Minister for Police to establish, maintain and elevate morale at unit level in the police force around the state, we might be asking too much. Having said that, I am doing my bit. I visit police on the front line at every opportunity I get. Individually, I have set myself the objective of getting to every single police station, division and subdivision in the state. It will take a while because there are a lot of them. My last visit was only a week or two ago. In the metro area there is a total of 35 police stations, of which I have visited 29. Every time I speak to local police officers I ask them how they are going and whether there is anything I can extract from them for me to advocate for on their behalf to the command or acting internally in government. In the regions there are more police stations; there are 123 police stations in the regions. The member for Vasse knows that; her electorate has dozens of them. I have visited 58 individual stations. Beyond that there are specialist units that are not necessarily part of a station or the like and I have gone to 22 of those. That is the total number of police stations that I might visit. In the metro area and the regions, there are 158; I have gone to 109 of them. Do not worry; I am absolutely out there commending and encouraging police officers and looking for their input on things that we can advocate for or do on their behalf. That is what I do every single day. My experience in the military in terms of leadership has imbued within me that it is a natural response. If a person is in a role that is perceived to have leadership responsibility, it is all about the people for whom one has that responsibility. The leader has responsibility to elevate them, care for them and do everything they can for them and they would never ask them to do something that they would not be willing to do. Ultimately, that should stand them in good stead. That is the approach I take to being the police minister and advocating on behalf of the police officers in uniform across this state. I am 68.9 per cent through the stations; I will keep going. I promise I will try to get to 100 per cent before I finish.

The member for Vasse and the Leader of the Opposition referred to the reflection on what was called “police ramping” in an article in today's *The West Australian*, which was written by Shannon Hampton, who is an excellent journalist. The observation made about the numbers is a bit dated because the member referred to a comparison between the 2018–19 financial year and the 2021–22 financial year, which ended in June last year.

I saw Paul Gale yesterday; he is a good bloke. I meet with him regularly. I absolutely seek the advice of the police union. At least every month, we have an opportunity for a very candid conversation in my office with my staff who are relevant to the police portfolio. We will continue to do that. We will always take criticism or contribution or whatever advice from the union.

Health and the police identified this issue some time ago. The Minister for Health is responding, and I have great hope that the initiative announced yesterday or the day before about ambulances and the elderly —

Ms A. Sanderson: Yesterday.

Mr P. PAPALIA: I am certain that that will make a difference. The other thing that will make a difference is what is happening with police collaboration with the health department over mental health drop-offs in particular, which is what *The West Australian* story is about. Late last year, on 15 November, the Commissioner of Police and some of his senior advisers met with the director general of the Department of Health and some of his senior advisers about this matter. Agreement was reached on a joint patient assessment and triage process in metropolitan EDs, with the aim of freeing up police officers within one hour—that is the objective but that cannot always be done—so it involves a joint handover process. It commenced at Royal Perth Hospital in November and has since expanded in a staged approach to all EDs across the metro area. It results in the triage of mental health patients who are conveyed by police. It is done jointly by police and the triage nurse. The obvious imperative is always ensuring the safety of the patient and hospital staff and then there is the aim to get police back on the road if they can. That is working. They have commenced a process to assess the handover process in regional WA hospitals and the metrics that might be examined to get these types of things working better.

Additional work is underway with the Mental Health Commission to further streamline assessment processes with the objective of further reducing the need for ED attendance by police with persons suffering mental health episodes. However, I point out that it was observed in the story by Shannon Hampton—she got it right—that there was quite a reduction in presentations between the 2018–19 and 2021–22 financial years, from 11 488 to 9 241. A 19.5 per cent reduction in presentations was observed. Obviously, it is going the right way in that regard. I can tell members that post the November meeting and the new measures undertaken collaboratively with Health, the process has seen handover times in emergency departments—this is times, not presentations—reduce by an average of 21 per cent. That is from November to now. I anticipate that that is going to result in a huge reduction in the overall time spent with this type of incident. It will only get better, because it is only early days—these are early moves to try to reduce the retention of police in EDs and hospitals. A lot of it is about the provision of mental health support outside EDs. That is happening as well, as the parliamentary notes I referred to suggest.

I know the member for Vasse addressed a lot of other matters, but one that I might refer to is the ramming of police cars. The Leader of the Opposition also raised that issue. This is absolutely a matter for the commissioner in terms of the operational process. I would not pretend to be a qualified police officer or someone who is capable of making an assessment of whether a law of that nature might assist, but I have asked the Commissioner of Police on a number of occasions whether he could look at this. The question is: should there be a law that applies a 10-year penalty for the ramming of police cars? The question really is whether that would have an impact on the individuals we are talking about, the vast majority of whom are juveniles, mostly in the Kimberley but also in the Pilbara. There are very few, fortunately—touch wood—in the south west. It is questionable whether any law we make in this place is going to have any bearing on their consideration of what they are about to do with a vehicle—whether they will steal it or target a police officer with it. There are a lot of other measures we can take, and we are working on taking those measures. I know that the Minister for Community Services is well and truly down the road on things we can do to change their behaviour.

A range of charges can be laid against those people currently, and they have significant penalties. The Commissioner of Police indicated to me that a range of offences under either the Criminal Code or the Road Traffic Act 1974 can be used to hold offenders accountable in the event that a police officer is injured or police property is damaged. For example, under section 292 of the Criminal Code, “Act intended to cause grievous bodily harm or prevent arrest”, the penalty is up to 20 years’ imprisonment. Under section 297, “Grievous bodily harm”, the penalty is up to 14 years’ imprisonment when a victim is a police officer, and includes a mandatory minimum of 12 months’ imprisonment. Under section 304, “Act or omission causing bodily harm or danger”, the penalty is up to 20 years’ imprisonment when there is intent to harm. Under section 444, “Criminal damage”, the penalty is up to 10 years’ imprisonment. In the Road Traffic Act 1974, section 59, “Dangerous driving causing death or grievous bodily harm”, carries a penalty of up to 14 years’ imprisonment, including a mandatory minimum of 12 months’ imprisonment for evading police. That is already law. They can be and are charged with these things. Section 59A, “Dangerous driving causing bodily harm”, carries a penalty of up to 10 years’ imprisonment, including a mandatory minimum of six months’ imprisonment when evading police.

I do not say to the commissioner, “Hey, why don’t you do this?”, I say, “The unions raised this publicly and it is worthy of consideration. Apparently, it is done in Victoria. What is your view?” I know this commissioner. I have to place this on the record. During my entire adult life, I have witnessed varying types and levels of leadership in a whole range of different environments. I have to tell members that I have never seen someone as committed to caring for the people under his command as this commissioner—no-one in excess of that. He is a frontline copper. He is recognised as being a police officer’s police officer. He cares about the people he leads. That is his number one consideration around anything he does. He is also tasked with establishing and maintaining community safety.

Those two things drive what he does; there is no question about that. I will always make very clear that no-one should suggest anything else unless they have some incredible piece of evidence that I have not been privy to. He is always considering the care of his officers. I know that he has considered this; it has been raised with him. It has been brought to my attention that a range of charges with significant penalties can already be applied to people who commit those offences.

I am just trying to check some of the other things.

Ms L. Mettam: What about the cashless debit card in Laverton and Leonora?

Mr P. PAPALIA: The member for Vasse made some observations about Laverton, Leonora and Kalgoorlie. I think I was probably the catalyst for the member's visit to Laverton, just quietly.

Ms L. Mettam interjected.

Mr P. PAPALIA: I am pretty certain. I know what it is like in opposition; you always have to have a crack at the other side and draw attention to anything they are doing, and join in with your side at the federal level. I remember the member for Vasse criticising the Prime Minister for not having visited Laverton. I posed the question in this place of whether she had been there herself. There was no response, but I noticed that she went there the very next week! That probably speaks volumes. I am not criticising the member for Vasse for that, because she has a big job and it is a big state. I travelled there by car a couple of times with my family. It is well worth it. That was before I was tourism minister. It is a long way to get out there and it is a long way to visit people, but I have regularly gone to the goldfields—Esperance police district. It is the biggest subdistrict in the world. I go by car and by aircraft, because some of the places that we go to, like Warakurna and Kintore, are very remote. Kintore is in the Northern Territory, but it has one of our police stations—we have an officer out there—and Warakurna is just about there. All those places are in that huge subdistrict, and I have been there. Steve Thompson, an Australian Irishman, is an excellent superintendent. I have seen him probably three or four times since I got this role. I was last in Laverton, Leonora and Kalgoorlie on 11 October last year, and before that I had been in Kalgoorlie on 21 September. I talk to them regularly, I see them and I get reports.

Of course, I have the best barometer of conditions in the goldfields possible, as I have the member for Kalgoorlie as a direct line of communication to that community. She knows that place inside out. She regularly visits Laverton and Leonora and is always talking to people across her electorate. She is an incredibly engaged member of Parliament and she knows what is going on. However, like me, she is a little perplexed. I received a briefing when the federal Leader of the Opposition, Hon Peter Dutton, came to town—well, he did not come to town; he went to the goldfields. I imagine it was the very first time he had been out there, but it was great to see him go out there. He suggested that there had been a lot of bad behaviour and criminal activity as a consequence of the removal of the cashless debit card. I had a briefing from the Western Australia Police Force that effectively pointed out one little flaw with that supposition, which is that the Miriuwung–Gajerrong people to whom he was referring—the ones who come in from the lands and visit Laverton and Leonora—were not actually subject to the card. That is what the police told me. If that is not right, I am happy to be corrected, but that is what the Western Australia Police Force said to me.

It is an interesting place, and I would like to know. The member said that he talked to police out there. I talked to the police. The officer in charge in Laverton, I think, is a Welshman, which is interesting because we have the member for Kalgoorlie who has Welsh ancestry as well. They are obviously both Australians now. They were excellent officers. They get whatever additional resources they need. Operation Regional Shield deploys resources specifically to the regions, and Assistant Commissioner Darryl Gaunt, who is the assistant commissioner for regions in Western Australia, is one of the most knowledgeable individuals in the police force and probably in the state about policing in the regions. He is an excellent officer and always ensures that his troops get the additional resourcing they need. There is no restriction on resources or additional support.

One other thing is that I will refer to the point made by the Leader of the Opposition. I know he prefaced it by saying that he is not saying they should not get help. I will urge him, please, to be reticent about entering into this discussion by suggesting in any way, regardless of his preface, that seeking medical assistance or assistance for mental health is a bad thing.

Mr R.S. Love: I did not say that at all.

Mr P. PAPALIA: I can tell the member that there has been a 45 per cent increase in service options available to officers in the Western Australia Police Force since 2019. It is a massive increase in services just in the last few years. It ranges from a chat with a trained peer-support colleague, and we have doubled the number of those, all the way up to assistance from funded, confidential counselling from an outside provider. All that is the full spectrum, so the numbers the member referred to are not a simple thing. It is not a bad thing; it is getting rid of the taboo and confirms that we have got rid of it. I ask the member, please, not to be retrograde and not to encourage people to revert to the old, male-dominated uniformed life of resisting assistance.

Extract from *Hansard*
[ASSEMBLY — Thursday, 30 March 2023]
p1790c-1798a

Ms Libby Mettam; Mr Peter Rundle; Speaker; Mr Shane Love; Mr Paul Papalia

Division

Question put and a division taken, the Deputy Speaker casting his vote with the noes, with the following result —

Ayes (6)

Ms M.J. Davies
Dr D.J. Honey

Mr R.S. Love
Ms L. Mettam

Mr P.J. Rundle
Ms M. Beard (*Teller*)

Noes (36)

Mr G. Baker
Dr A.D. Buti
Mr J.N. Carey
Ms C.M. Collins
Ms L. Dalton
Ms K.E. Giddens
Ms M.J. Hammat
Mr T.J. Healy
Mr M. Hughes

Mr W.J. Johnston
Mr H.T. Jones
Mr D.J. Kelly
Ms A.E. Kent
Dr J. Krishnan
Mr P. Lilburne
Mr M. McGowan
Ms S.F. McGurk
Mr D.R. Michael

Mr S.A. Millman
Mrs L.M. O'Malley
Mr P. Papalia
Mr S.J. Price
Mr D.T. Punch
Mr J.R. Quigley
Ms M.M. Quirk
Ms R. Saffioti
Ms A. Sanderson

Mr D.A.E. Scaife
Ms J.J. Shaw
Mrs J.M.C. Stojkovski
Dr K. Stratton
Mr C.J. Tallentire
Mr D.A. Templeman
Ms C.M. Tonkin
Ms S.E. Winton
Ms C.M. Rowe (*Teller*)

Question thus negatived.