

DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT - CHILD PROTECTION

525. Mr P.D. OMODEI to the Premier:

In 2004-05 there were 96 coroner notifications of child deaths received by the Department for Community Development. Of these, 52 had contact with the DCD. Of those children who were known to DCD, 43 were aged five years or under and 34 were aged just one or under. How many more children have to die or be abused before the Premier will change his government's approach to the protection of our children?

Mr A.J. CARPENTER replied:

I thank the Leader of the Opposition for the question, and I welcome Shenton College students to question time. This issue stems from our discussion of the Wade Scale case. Again, I express great sorrow for what happened in that case. The broader issue is important and needs to be addressed as well. Over a period in government we have put in place a lot of changes to try to address circumstances that prevail in too many family homes around Western Australia and too many circumstances emerge that we would prefer did not emerge. We need to address them as they do emerge. It must be remembered that Wade Scale died in 2003 - three years ago. Since that time there has been a large amount of government effort to try to address the issues. I went through many of them yesterday. There have been changes to procedures. The Child Death Review Committee was established. There has been increased government spending and government effort. I will take this opportunity to outline as many of those initiatives as I can.

We established and acted upon the recommendations of the Gordon inquiry, investing \$75 million in new resources and staff to protect children in indigenous communities. Since 2003, 51 positions have been created and filled in the area of child protection. They include 25 child protection workers, 14 Aboriginal support workers and 12 Strong Families coordinators. In this year's state budget, the department received an extra \$140 million as part of a funding package over the next four years, the biggest single allocation of additional funding in the history of the department. The funding boost will ensure that an extra 154 permanent staff are employed in the 2006-07 financial year, rising to 200 by 2009-10. We have undertaken a significant overhaul of child protection laws in almost 60 years in this state, with a stronger focus on accountability and transparency and the department's responses to families in the case of concern for a child's wellbeing and its responsibilities for children in care. We introduced tough new cyber predator legislation, enabling police to pose as children online to conduct sting operations against paedophiles. We established new laws to provide the indefinite detention of serious sex offenders and convicted child sex offenders on completion of their sentence if there is a risk they will reoffend. We passed new working with children laws, which will require criminal record screening for people working with children in a paid or voluntary capacity over the next five years. We introduced new laws, currently before the Parliament, to establish WA's first independent children's commissioner with a broad mandate to advocate and consider all issues covering children and young people. We closed the Swan Valley Nyungah Community camp due to ongoing concern regarding child abuse in the community, despite Liberal opposition to that closure.

A total of \$27.2 million has been allocated for children's expenditure in 2006-07. We established a Northbridge curfew to get children and teenagers off our streets. We established a process to ensure children and young people abused in care have access to independent legal advice. We independently reviewed the Department for Community Development's response to children abused in care, the Cant and Murray reports, and established an independent child death review process. The independent Child Death Review Committee commenced child death reviews in January 2005. In its annual report in 2004-05, this independent committee identified the following improvements since August 2003. The new Children and Community Services Act, proclaimed in March 2006, will significantly change the way the department works. In particular, the act has a strong focus on engaging children and families in critical decision making which affects their lives. The act provides clear definitions of what is meant by a child being harmed and/or neglected and when a child is in need of protection and care. Field staff were trained in the act from September 2005 to March 2006. The department has issued a revised assessment safety framework, which encourages accountable decision making by caseworkers. Officers can use the framework to make informed decisions about when a child is in need of protection. Since 12 November 2004, caseworkers have been able to access field worker guidelines online. This tool provides a guide to decision making on complex cases, practical issues and professional standards of work. The department has also revised and strengthened its guidelines for responding to families where there have been multiple contacts and identifiable risk factors for children. The department's team leaders have received supervision training and the department is establishing a standards monitoring unit, which will be fully operational by 2007. There is no government that has done more in this area in the history of this state.