

*Standing Committee on Public Administration — Thirty-seventh Report —
Delivery of ambulance services in Western Australia: Critical condition — Motion*

Resumed from 17 May 2023 on the following motion moved by Hon Pierre Yang —

That the report be noted.

Hon SHELLEY PAYNE: It is great to get a chance to continue my comments on this report; I had only a couple of minutes last time. I want to thank the Standing Committee on Public Administration for all its work on its thirty-seventh report, *Delivery of ambulance services in Western Australia: Critical condition*. The report was tabled and it revealed a couple of things. First of all, I was very pleased that there was a big section on regional ambulance services. I was also pleased with some of the recommendations, including a recommendation for the Department of Health to investigate extending the current service delivery model—the majority of work in the regions is performed by volunteers—and replacing it with a hybrid model in which more career paramedics would be deployed to work alongside volunteers.

The report also refers to issues in the metropolitan area. It reveals that emergency ambulance services are under significant strain and that St John Ambulance was unable to achieve its contractual targets. The committee made a number of recommendations on that. I was also pleased when the government released its response, *A new century for ambulance services*, to the committee's inquiry. It refers to a clear need to fundamentally change the relationship between the Department of Health and St John Ambulance. The government gave support or in-principle support to 46 of the Public Administration Committee's 48 recommendations. The government is working through the implementation. In the little time I have, I thought I would talk about what the government has achieved since the committee did this great piece of work and the government provided its response.

At the end of December 2022, a new five-year contract was signed with St John. This is an enhanced contract with key performance indicators to boost accountability. It is also aligned with one of the key recommendations to put additional paramedics in the regions. It combined with a commitment to 31 paramedics in the regions and 34 paramedics for the metro area. This increases the number of paramedics in the bush by more than 25 per cent. Since the new contract and commitment to those extra paramedics, I am pleased to say that the extra 31 paid paramedics are out there now in the regions. For example, there are four new paramedics in Esperance and they have transitioned to the new hybrid model. It has really helped to take a lot of stress off the volunteers, which has been a really great outcome. Geraldton has received four new full-time paid paramedics. Busselton has two. Narrogin has two, which is great for the Narrogin region. It is a real hub for all the surrounding areas and hundreds of patients fly in and out each year. Northam has three new full-time paid paramedics. Newman has one, and east Bunbury has one. Margaret River also has four. There is a roster of eight, which it uses to relieve their paid paramedics in the regions. It is fantastic that it has been rolled out in the regions and is a really great outcome. I congratulate the committee for those recommendations. I also thank Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson for that commitment to the regions. It has made a huge difference. They were struggling with volunteers in the regions and this has really helped to make a difference and, as I said, take off a lot of the weight.

Another initiative was Hon Amber-Jade Sanderson establishing a State Health Operations Centre late last year. A commitment of \$47.2 million was made to establish an operations centre. It will co-locate with St John WA, the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the WA virtual emergency department staff. The co-location of those essential services is really a critical strategy in building an integrated statewide delivery service.

[Quorum formed.]

Hon SHELLEY PAYNE: Another great initiative that we announced at the end of January this year is the new patient transport coordination hub, which is being introduced. It will improve planned patient transfers between hospitals. It is expected that the new patient transport coordination hub will coordinate the transport of more than 20 000 non-urgent patients every year. It is part of our \$487 million investment in improving access to emergency care. I know we have had issues with ambulance ramping and I want to give some statistics about how much our ramping hours have reduced across the state—by 21 per cent in 2023 compared with 2022. For example, in December last year, which is busy over the holiday period, there was a 44 per cent reduction compared with December 2022. A lot of the initiatives that our government is doing are thanks to the help of this committee and investing in health. All our commitments are really making a big difference, in both the regions and the metropolitan area. The PaTCH is going to operate seven days a week with dedicated staff and it will operate from 6.00 am until 10.00 pm. Again, it will take a lot of stress off the St John ambulance staff. As I mentioned, the State Health Operations Centre, which will be co-located with the new virtual emergency service department, is looking at providing a seamless service for patients.

Another thing I want to mention is the rescue helicopter service in the regions and our commitment in May 2022 to deliver the next generation aircraft, which have a longer range. The new helicopters, which are under construction at the moment but are nearly ready to be rolled out, will have a 350-kilometre range from their bases at Bunbury and

Jandakot. That will expand their range by over 75 per cent. They are capable of being airborne in less than 15 minutes. Since the rescue helicopter service started operating in 2003, they have flown on over 9 000 missions. It has really helped to save lives; it is a great initiative. There are some statistics that the helicopters have flown the equivalent of more than 50 trips around the globe since undertaking the first mission in August 2023. They respond to emergency calls 24 hours a day, every day of the year. It is something that is really important, particularly for people in the regions. With the base in Bunbury and the 350-kilometre range, it will be really great to be able to service even larger areas of the state and reach further into the regions. Thank you very much for that and also to the RAC for its support.

The last thing I want to mention is the help and training we are giving some of the emergency responders to deal better with domestic violence and domestic violence call-outs. This was an initiative of our state government back at the end of 2022 when we committed \$2 million to roll out family and domestic violence training for 000 responders. Under our partnership with St John, the training will be delivered to more than 5 000 first responders and help build the capacity of call-takers, paramedics and volunteers to recognise and respond to family and domestic violence. St John has responded to more than 6 000 cases involving violence against women, including assault, sexual assault and stabbings, and a further 2 500 cases involving children. Thank you for that. The first cohort from the state operations centre recently completed the training and I look forward to that rolling out as it will make a big difference to the responses they make.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: I rise to speak on the thirty-seventh report of the Standing Committee on Public Administration, *Delivery of ambulance services in Western Australia: Critical condition*. The report was tabled in May 2022, almost two years ago. The government response was in August that same year. The Council has considered the report on two previous occasions—16 November 2022 and 17 May 2023. Of course, as members will see from the report, the Standing Committee on Public Administration was chaired by Hon Pierre Yang. It continues to be so, I understand, and I want to recognise that in the meantime, the honourable member has also been promoted to the office of Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health. Almost at the two-year anniversary, I look forward to perhaps a status report from the government, indeed from the parliamentary secretary, on the implementation of the very many findings and recommendations that members will find in this considerable report.

I do not think there has been enough progress. I have listened to Hon Shelley Payne talk about some of the initiatives that the government is doing and many of them are positive, but are they enough? We have a situation in which country ambulances in Western Australia are significantly underfunded and at a high cost for patients and consumers. This is borne out in the committee's own report.

The financial information found in tables in this report shows that Western Australia, along with South Australia, are the worst jurisdictions in the country when it comes to financial support for ambulance services. This is more so an issue in our country areas where we rely entirely on volunteers to deliver the important service that they do. We rely on them not only to deliver the service, but effectively to run chook raffles to buy their next heart monitor, their next ambulance or their next electric stretcher. It is not enough to ask them to volunteer their time to train, develop and respond; no, they have to buy increasingly more expensive tools to provide their service. We compare that with any other emergency service organisation in our state and find that similar volunteers volunteering in the emergency service space are not asked to do the same. We addressed that many decades ago. We addressed the inequity and inadequacy in funding, but in 2024 we are still lagging behind the nation in supporting our country ambulance service.

It was interesting to listen to the final contribution of Hon Shelley Payne, who touched on the issue of the emergency rescue helicopter service. What an important and lifesaving service that is. I do not think that is in dispute whatsoever.

Hon Darren West: Introduced and secured by Labor.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: It is a very good point, Hon Darren West. The Labor Party introduced the first rescue helicopter service.

Hon Darren West: You did not fund it. It is fixed.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: The Liberal government introduced the first regional emergency rescue helicopter service, which had a very uncertain funding future when Labor came to government. Western Australians have called for an expansion of the service. It is borne out in parts of the report that is before us. But it is also borne out in findings of the coroner. It is borne out in the government's own aeromedical services inquiry. The *Chief Health Officer's inquiry into aeromedical services in Western Australia* was tabled in June 2022, just one month after the standing committee's report was tabled. It recommended the ERHS fleet should be increased by two and a half times its current resource and that, in time, Western Australia will need seven to nine rescue helicopters.

The government trots out its talking points. The emergency rescue helicopter service services 90 per cent of Western Australians. It is something that Telstra would say: "We service 95 per cent of Australians." The reality is that 80 per cent of Australians live in the metropolitan area. They rarely require the services of an emergency rescue helicopter because an ambulance is faster. What members are saying when they trot out those talking points is that 10 per cent of Western Australians who live outside the metropolitan area have access to an emergency

rescue helicopter service. They are the ones typically in the south west area within a 300-kilometre radius or so of Bunbury. Half the population outside of Perth has access to an emergency rescue helicopter service.

Western Australian academic research has demonstrated that someone is twice as likely to die from trauma in a region of Western Australia that does not have access to the emergency rescue helicopter service. I agree; it is a lifesaving service. It is an important service. It is servicing only half of Western Australians who live outside Perth. That is the problem. The Western Australian government is swimming in cash. The midyear review revised its operating surplus from \$3.3 billion to \$3.7 billion. That is a \$400 million increase. The government's pet project, the Causeway pedestrian bridge across the Swan River, was announced prior to the last election. It was \$50 million. Then it went to \$100 million. Now we know that it is \$140 million. No-one blinks an eye.

Government is all about priorities. The problem is that this government's priorities are all wrong. It is effectively prioritising a pedestrian bridge across the Swan River with a blank cheque—whatever it costs, whatever it takes—over the lives of Western Australians who do not have access to an emergency rescue helicopter service. Whilst the government members are laughing on the government benches as I make this contribution, I draw their attention to the views of the Deputy State Coroner, Sarah Linton.

In her findings on 17 June 2022, she stated —

In my view, it is appropriate and fair that the Western Australians living in the Mid-West of Western Australia and above be provided with air assets to assist with search and rescues, in the same way that those of us living in Perth and the South West are lucky enough to have access to, noting we also have access to a far more comprehensive ambulance service on the ground. It is unclear from the information available how available the additional rescue helicopter will be to people in the Mid-West. If it is not readily available, then that is of great concern, particularly given the abovementioned election commitment to ensure that such a service is made available to people in the Mid-West.

It is not good enough that the two new rescue helicopters coming online have an additional operating range of 50 kilometres. When the government is criticised over this, its response is that we can now fly to Dongara. I hate to inform the government benches that there is a lot more to Western Australia beyond Dongara. Many of those constituencies are represented by Labor members. At a time when this government is going to post a \$3 700 million operating surplus, its talking point is: we are happy with what we have.

Hon DARREN WEST: I was not going to talk about this report today, but I cannot let that speech go without a response. Hon Martin Aldridge stood up and dumped the bucket on every single hardworking volunteer sub-centre of St John Ambulance across Western Australia who proudly volunteer for their community, proudly fundraise for their community and proudly serve their community in their greatest time of need. Then he dumped the bucket on the RAC rescue helicopter service, which was introduced, and funding secured, by the Gallop and McGowan governments respectively. He did not mention an organisation called the Royal Flying Doctor Service, which the member will one day work out operates aircraft that are much faster than helicopters and can service more remote regions of the state than helicopters. The member will also understand one day that Geraldton Regional Hospital is not a tertiary hospital. You can run a rescue helicopter in the midwest but you ain't gonna make it to Perth with one, and it is quicker in a fixed-wing aeroplane. He will work that out one day, but I am not going to stand by. I am going to stand here and defend every single regional sub-centre. I am going to stand here and defend the helicopter service that we worked so diligently to introduce and secure funding for. I am going to defend the RFDS and all the people in those organisations and commend them for the wonderful role they play in taking care of us in regional Western Australia.

I will not stand for criticism of those services. They proudly provide those services to their community. I think if the honourable member went to the community of Toodyay, for example, and said, "Look, all you've been doing is great but we're going to take it over from here", he might get a fair bit of pushback. Communities like to provide their own services. Of course, we will support them, and we are, as Hon Shelley Payne pointed out earlier, with the provision of paramedics across the state. An expansion of paramedics by a conservative government has never been seen. We stand by our emergency services in the regions.

We made significant changes to the emergency services levy to provide greater funding and resources to all of our emergency services across the state. We stand by them proudly. I am not going to stand by and have comments like those by the member go without response.

That brings me to this report. I have the great pleasure of being a member of the Standing Committee on Public Administration. It was aptly and ably chaired by Hon Pierre Yang, who has no doubt called on all of his time in the military—his training that he has had in the reserves as a captain—to bring his skills to the committee and provide wonderful leadership.

I think it is fair to say that the ambulance system in Western Australia was in a difficult spot. There was poor morale and a poor culture at the time, and that had been built up over decades. It was not a new thing. Many of the people in that service felt undervalued. They did not feel supported and that was where the inquiry came from. It was through

understanding that those very vital and wonderful individuals within the organisation had a message that needed to be heard. Our committee heard them, and members may remember that *The West Australian* immediately painted it as some sort of union witch-hunt to bring the ambulance service back in-house. That was totally and grossly incorrect. It was never the intention. What we wanted was a better ambulance service as a result of the inquiry.

I am delighted to stand here today and say that is exactly what has been delivered. We have a better ambulance service as a result. It was nobody's fault. We certainly cannot blame the last CEO, Michelle Fife, who is a wonderful person. We cannot blame her for the problems that confronted her with the ambulance service. She came into the role to try to fix a lot of the issues. I give her great credit for that. She has moved on from the post but gave her absolute all. She could not have been more cooperative with the committee during the inquiry.

St John Ambulance made itself available every time we asked it to appear and give us more evidence. It gave us a better understanding of the issues that the ambulance service was confronted with. I am delighted that the Minister for Health has chosen to adopt the recommendations and make the changes that she has. She certainly has more than a passing interest in the ambulance service, as she has a long history, through the union movement, of dealing with people on the front line. This is a report that was given to a willing minister—for probably the first time ever—a minister willing to make sure the changes were able to be made and the service was able to be improved. On top of all the wonderful initiatives that Hon Shelley Payne has taken the time to outline during her contribution, ambulance ramping times have decreased significantly as a direct result of the changes that have been adopted by the minister and the government as a result of this outstanding report. I am very proud of this report. This is an outstanding body of work brought together by a bipartisan committee. It was not always easy. We faced challenging circumstances, in which we travelled to regional areas to see firsthand the need for paramedics in the regions.

We saw situations in which the paramedic was the person restocking the ambulance and the volunteers were the ones going out to the jobs. We saw that as an unusual way to go about things. We looked at all kinds of issues that confront our volunteer ambulances in the regions every day, and our paramedics in the cities every day. It was their desires and their needs and their pleas in some cases that led us to make recommendations and share findings. I am very proud of this body of work. It is a wonderful report and all I have heard is gratitude from anyone I have spoken to in the sector—gratitude that we shone a light on the issues and brought them to the government's attention and that the government has responded in the way it has.

I accept Hon Martin Aldridge's premise of the government having a surplus. It has a surplus through good economic management that we are investing back into the regions. That includes securing funding for the Bunbury helicopter. We have worked closely with the Royal Flying Doctor Service and other organisations. We put paramedics into the regions. We are getting on with the job of delivering, in conjunction with the various operators and ambulance services right across Western Australia. We saw examples of a community such as Bidyadanga, which did not have an ambulance. We learnt a lot about the haves and the have-nots in regional Western Australia—it was already in place when we came to government. Rather than sit back and throw stones, the committee got on with the job and made the recommendations that we thought needed to be made.

I do not have much time left to go into the detail of the report. I know that we talked about this report before and I could talk about it all day, because I am very proud of what we achieved, but I want to take the last minute and a bit that I have to talk about some of the people who we met, from the executive management of St John Ambulance down through the ranks. We met people who are in the call centres. Members, put yourselves in a position in which you are sitting in a room and a call comes in, with someone in a highly distressed state on the end of the phone. It could be anything that confronts that person and it is your job to manage that person's stress and anxiety, to calm them, and to get the information needed to dispatch an ambulance to save a life. That is the sort of thing that they do all day, every day, all night, every night, as the case may be. We made changes to the way that the call centre operates. We are bringing that to the State Operations Centre, back together with the other emergency services. That was a major undertaking that the minister has given and that we will deliver.

I think those people are wonderful and I could tell that they were pleased to see us. They were pleased that the committee came and had a look at their workplace to see what they are dealing with. We also went to ambulance stations. We fully understood what was going on in ambulance service delivery in Western Australia. We put it into this report. It is a wonderful report and I encourage anyone who has not read it to take the time to read it.

I think the member could work with the government rather than throw stones, and I am always going to defend everyone involved in the provision of ambulance services in Western Australia.

Hon MARTIN ALDRIDGE: Thank you for the opportunity to respond to the contribution of Hon Darren West as well as make a further contribution on this report. Hon Darren West always reverts to this when there is criticism of his government: it is somehow a criticism of the frontline workers, the volunteers, the agencies—it is not! It is a criticism of his inaction—of his government's inaction while it is sitting on a pot of cash. He likes to twist the debate to somehow make it a criticism of the volunteers—oh my goodness! It was interesting to hear his comments about the Royal Flying Doctor Service, because the Chief Health Officer's inquiry made very similar recommendations

about how it is underfunded and under-resourced. I encourage the member to speak to the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health and get a copy of the government's response, because it supported it.

In his last closing contribution, the member spoke about the call centre. The call centre has not changed. St John Ambulance is still taking 000 calls. The state health operations centre—shock—is not answering 000 calls. Again, I encourage the member to get a briefing from the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Health.

The Deputy State Coroner, in paragraph 496 of her findings, states —

Acting Assistant Commissioner Paul Carr from DFES also gave evidence at the inquest to explain further the role that DFES plays in these operations. A/Ass Commissioner Carr performs the role of looking after country operations for DFES-related hazards, which includes fires, floods, cyclones and storms, and the capability of DFES to raise and main volunteer services to respond to those hazards. A/Ass Commissioner Carr gave evidence that DFES have supported three submissions for government funding for a rescue helicopter in the Mid-West Gascoyne region, but to date none of them have been funded.

Perhaps Hon Darren West might seek a briefing from acting Assistant Commissioner Paul Carr or maybe even the Deputy State Coroner to understand what this government is not doing. It is not providing a rescue helicopter service to the midwest. It is refusing the budget funding to do so.

Consideration of report postponed, pursuant to standing orders.

Progress reported and leave granted to sit again, pursuant to standing orders.