

GRANDPARENTS CARING FOR THEIR GRANDCHILDREN

Grievance

MR R.F. JOHNSON (Hillarys) [9.43 am]: I grieve on behalf of the thousands of grandparents in this State who are forced to look after their grandchildren. This occurs for various reasons but many times it is because the parents of the children are drug addicts, in prison or do not want to look after their children and leave the State or country. Those little children must be looked after by somebody. I commend those grandparents for the fantastic job they do in looking after their grandchildren.

I have two grievances: one against the federal Government and another against this Government, in particular the Minister for Community Development, Women's Interests, Seniors and Youth. My grievances are about what I and many grandparents perceive as the lack of support and financial assistance for the wonderful job of bringing up young children who are in danger unless they are with the grandparents and cared for properly.

I predicate my remarks by stating a few facts which I believe are obvious but with which the minister may not agree. We must ensure that the vital role of grandparents is not ignored. An office of the commissioner for children should be established so that grandparents have someone to go to for help. Currently, they do not get help from this Government or the federal Government. A commissioner for children would have the right to intercede with government departments and ensure that the best interests of the child are paramount. In extreme cases a commissioner could give some funding assistance. A commissioner would be able to take into account the ability of the grandparents and, most importantly, their capacity to be heard. We must legislate to ensure that the commissioner is a decision maker and that in situations in which parents are deceased or incapable of caring for their children, the grandparents are the first to be considered to stand in loco parentis. This Government and this minister put in place an Aboriginal child placement principle, but it has done nothing similar for non-indigenous children. That is a disgrace and discriminatory. My position and that of the Liberal Party, which will be put in place when it resumes government, is for the establishment of a commissioner for children. Such a position would be equal to that of the Commissioner for Equal Opportunity.

I have met with a great number of grandparents who care for their grandchildren. I know what it is like because I had to do it for six months. I was fortunate in that I did not need financial assistance or support from the Department for Community Development or Centrelink. However, I am one of a few people in that position. The vast majority of grandparents who are forced to look after their grandchildren are not fortunate enough to be in that financial position or receive adequate family support to do the job.

The time allocated to me for this grievance is inadequate to do it justice. However, I want to summarise the points so that the minister can think carefully about what should happen. Obviously the interests and safety of the child must be paramount. I have a concern about the minister's departments. I understand that many people in those departments, including some of the team leaders, with responsibility for looking after children's interests are not qualified social workers. I would like the minister to respond to that. If that is the case, unqualified people are not only doing a job that should be done by qualified people but also acting as team leaders.

I have met a great number of grandparents in this situation. They come from all walks of life and all parts of Western Australia. In one particular case a suicidal child came into the care of his grandparents when the mother went to the Department for Community Development for help and to give up the child. The department approached the grandparents, who took the boy in and did a great job. However, they say that they received no help or assistance from the Department for Community Development. They received nothing to cover the child's medical and pharmaceutical expenses and no financial benefit for doing that job.

Another grandparent went to the Department for Community Development about custody of the child. The child was in extreme danger but the grandparents could not get social security payments. That was because when the child was spoken about with the department, the mother took the child back. The minute some mothers who are drug addicts come under the clear impression that their child will be taken permanently from them, they step in and take the child back, purely to get social security money to shoot up their arms. This happened in the south west of the State. A grandparent contacted the Department for Community Development and a representative from the department went to visit her. The grandparent desperately needed money for food and clothing for the child, who was dirty. The problem was that the mother of the child was also at the meeting. The grandparent pleaded with the departmental child protection worker to not give the money to the mother as she knew where it would go. The grandparent asked that she receive the money so that she could buy food and clothing and carry out the necessary duties to care for that child. The child protection worker refused to take the grandparent's advice and gave the money to the mother. Naturally, the mother went away and shot that money up her arm. The grandparent was left with no money whatsoever to care for that child.

Another grandparent said to me that on at least three or four occasions when the Department for Community Development had been contacted about the living conditions and the general situation that the grandchild was in,

and in particular her being sent to school dirty, tired and with no lunch, no action whatsoever was taken. The Department for Community Development did not want to take the child away from the mother even though the child was obviously at risk. However, its staff recorded each conversation with the grandparents, so that when the records were subpoenaed for the court action which eventually followed, it proved that they were concerned and did try to take action on behalf of the child.

What those examples say about the minister's department is that it is a toothless tiger.

MS S.M. McHALE (Thornlie - Minister for Community Development, Women's Interests, Seniors and Youth) [9.52 am]: I thank the member for raising this grievance and his clear interest in this matter, which is an area of social policy in which I certainly share his concern. The Opposition has used this grievance to criticise the Government for doing nothing. At the outset I will disabuse the member of his impression that this Government has done nothing. This Government is the first Government in Australia to set up a service specifically for grandparents. Before I outline exactly what the Government has done, I want to take great issue with the member's comments about team leaders in my department not being social workers.

Mr R.F. Johnson: Qualified social workers.

Ms S.M. McHALE: I cannot tell the member the qualifications of the team leaders and the staff. However, I can tell the member that the staff are totally dedicated to child protection and community development. They work under extremely difficult circumstances because of a decade of under-resourcing and, more importantly, because of the issues that confront social workers. As the member knows full well, those issues are highly complex, and involve many issues around dysfunctional families and complex interfamily relationships. I therefore want to disabuse the member that I have staff who are unqualified. I have staff who are totally dedicated to the task ahead of them. I would expect members to support them rather than suggest that they are unqualified.

I am aware of this complex issue. Because of my concern for the growing number of grandparents who look after children, we have set up a number of services and supports for them. Some grandparents, for a range of reasons, take on the primary role of looking after their grandchildren in a willing way but often with great concern that at their time in life they are faced with taking on the primary parenting role. The member knows this full well. The three issues that face grandparents and that constantly surface in the work we do with grandparents are the need for financial advice and support, the need for legal support pertaining to parenting orders and the like, and the need for information on parenting skills, particularly when the children they take on have been living with parents who are drug dependent, alcohol dependent and sometimes victims of domestic violence. The grandparents are often taking on children who have a range of social needs. At a time when most grandparents are wanting to do other things in their lives and have finished their parenting roles, some are finding themselves confronted with being parents again in a very different environment from that which existed when they were young parents. The three issues are finance, law and parenting.

In part as a response to the Community Drug Summit in 2001, this Government set up the first support mechanism for grandparents in 2001-02. It established the grandparents support service to provide the very support that grandparents need. The service offers practical assistance, informal counselling and advice on child management, financial support, links to other community resources and support needs. The service is known as Grandcare and is provided by Wanslea Family Services. Since its inception, over 500 grandparents have contacted the service and accessed one of the six components of the service. Therefore, for the Opposition to say that this Government has done nothing in this area is for it to say the opposite of the truth.

Mr R.F. Johnson: How much funding are you providing?

Ms S.M. McHALE: It is \$100 000 over three years.

Mr R.F. Johnson: \$30 000 a year is disgraceful.

Ms S.M. McHALE: This is the first service of its kind in Australia, and the Government will go on to support and fund other services because it takes its social responsibilities very seriously and funds services. We do not just talk about them but confront some of the most difficult social issues in our community and deal with them.

The Wanslea Family Services' Grandcare has six components. It has an information line, a telephone-based support and advocacy service, a visiting assessment and support service, it gives ongoing grandparenting skills and personal development training, it provides grandparents with creche facilities, which is a new initiative, and of course it provides access to Wanslea Family Services.

We are also working with Centrelink to make it easier for grandparents to access income support. We all know that it is very difficult for people to find their way through federal government funding sources. We need to make sure that the federal Government facilitates its services in a way that is more accessible.

In the coming weeks we are also conducting a forum with service providers who link with grandparents. We are bringing them together and will be talking with those service providers and seeking from them their ideas about

what additional services and support grandparents need. As a result, we will be committing additional funds to providing those services.

The Government is doing something in this area. A ministerial council comprising all state ministers met recently. I was successful in amending the national foster care plan to include relatives and grandparents.

In summary, we have established the first Australian service dedicated to grandparents. We will very shortly be providing material on legal and financial support and additional funds to set up new services. The department will work to clarify support that can be obtained and will work with the federal department to simplify the process for income support. The national plan for foster carers has been expanded to include supporting relatives. I am very proud of this Government's record in this area and it is an Australian first.

The SPEAKER: I call the member for Eyre to order for the first time for allowing his mobile phone to ring.