

CHILD PROTECTION — CASEWORKER WORKLOAD — KIMBERLEY

Grievance

MS D.G. D'ANNA (Kimberley — Parliamentary Secretary) [9.41 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Child Protection. I believe this is a crucial issue that deserves some attention, and that is the need for more support for our frontline workers in the Department of Communities. I thank the minister for taking my grievance.

I would like to start by saying that the care and protection of our children is important. It is essential that we provide the necessary resources to ensure their safety and wellbeing with their families, and on-country when possible. It is no secret that the number of children requiring intervention and protection services is greater than what we would like. When we speak of child protection, we are not merely speaking about numbers or statistics; we are talking about the safety, wellbeing and future of our children.

Every child deserves to grow up in a nurturing and supportive environment that fosters and enhances their development into adulthood and gets them on a path that leads to better life outcomes. The demand for frontline workers who work directly with these vulnerable children and families is at an all-time high. We need more frontline workers who can respond swiftly and effectively to families and children who are referred to the department. It is important that these frontline workers support the families, and part of their role is to ensure safety and wellbeing, to advocate for these families and children and to support these families in many different facets. They also need to be culturally sensitive. Early intervention and prevention is key.

The current workforce in the child protection sector is overwhelmed and understaffed. Caseloads of frontline workers can sometimes be quite straining on some of these child protection workers, and I know a few of them throughout the Kimberley. This strain can sometimes lead to burnout, but, most importantly, it can compromise a worker's effectiveness when addressing the needs of our vulnerable children and families. I believe it is imperative that steps are put in place to reduce the pressure on some of our workers. We need to ease caseloads of existing workers, which means more intensive supports to families. Supporting families is a significant part of the role of a child protection worker. Supporting families and overcoming challenges may impact a parent's ability to provide a safe and nurturing environment for their children. The support might involve connecting families with community resources, such as counselling or other support services that can help address issues such as poverty, substance abuse or mental health problems. By focusing on strengthening families, child protection workers can prevent situations that lead to harm or neglect.

Early intervention services in child protection are proven to be vital in addressing some of the complex and social issues across WA, particularly for Aboriginal children and families. We also need to emphasise the importance of cross-agency support and acknowledge the collaborative work that is currently being done to enable better outcomes for the families and children involved. We cannot expect one agency to bear the weight of this responsibility alone. It requires a unified effort, with stakeholders from various sectors coming together to share resources, expertise and information. Cross-agency partnerships are of vital importance to address the multifaceted issues surrounding child protection. Collaboration with child protection services, law enforcement, healthcare providers, educators, community organisations and Aboriginal community-controlled organisations is essential to create a safety net that leaves no child behind. By working together, we can provide a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to child protection. Moreover, we must acknowledge the importance of local employment in this sector.

As I mentioned before, I know many local DCP workers in the Kimberley. In my electorate of the Kimberley, we have child protection officers in Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Kununurra. Recruiting and retaining frontline workers from within our own communities not only ensures better understanding of local needs and cultural sensitivities, but also fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the wellbeing of our children. Investing in training programs and career development opportunities for aspiring child protection workers can also help bridge the gap between supply and demand in this critical sector. It is also essential that we recognise that their roles are complex and demands a deep understanding of social, cultural and family dynamics. It is imperative that we support our frontline workers and value their contributions. These dedicated individuals work tirelessly in challenging and often emotionally taxing situations. We must provide them with the necessary training, resources and ongoing support to help them carry out their vital work effectively.

In conclusion, the department of child protection plays a vital role in safeguarding the wellbeing of our children. By addressing the need for more frontline workers, promoting cross-agency collaboration, employing local staff and supporting our on-the-ground workers, we can make a real difference in the lives of vulnerable children and families. Therefore, I today ask the minister: How are we supporting our current child protection workers? How are we supporting the growth of the child protection workforce?

MS S.E. WINTON (Wanneroo — Minister for Child Protection) [9.47 am]: I thank the member for Kimberley for her grievance this morning on this most important issue around supporting child protection staff, particularly

in the Kimberley. The member for Kimberley and I have a really, really close relationship. I value it, and I value her contributions not only in this place, but also in constantly advocating for her community because she is closest to the people of the Kimberley who have the solutions for these challenging issues.

We know that across Australia, one in every 32 children come into contact with child protection services. When I think about that broadly and from a teaching perspective, that is at least one kid in every classroom. We know and we need to recognise right here that Aboriginal children are over-represented in the out-of-home care system, and this government is making it a priority to address that over-representation. A really critical part of doing this work is having a child protection workforce that is professional and well resourced.

Since becoming minister, I have made it my priority to understand the challenges of child protection workers right around the state, particularly in the Kimberley. It has been my great privilege to meet with them, in not only Broome, but also Kununurra and Derby. The member for Kimberley would know that those sessions, in which I talk deeply with child protection staff, provide insight about the resources they need in order to do the important work that they do. I will continue to listen to them. The most vulnerable kids in the community, and children's families and carers, need those child protection workers to support vulnerable children and enable them to be safe and supported.

Like many other industries and workplaces, the child protection workforce is not immune from being impacted by the challenges of the tight labour market and the competing demands and opportunities that are available to qualified and experienced child protection workers, particularly in the regions. Recruiting and retaining child protection staff is critically important. It was really good earlier this week to recognise social workers in the child protection field. I want to acknowledge Dr Katrina Stratton, a former child protection worker. It is great to have her insights as a member in this place.

Since 2007, the government has invested more than ever in the child protection workforce. More child protection workers than ever are on the front line doing the important work of keeping vulnerable children safe. We have increased the workforce to some 300 FTE, an increase of 35 per cent. Our strategies, through statewide talent campaigns, interstate and local recruitment activities and the social work student placement program are having an impact. It is really important that we support students who are undertaking their qualifications. Those placements in the Department of Communities is also paying dividends, with 63 per cent of those students becoming permanent employees of Communities. But of course we need to do more.

Housing is one of the issues relating to the attraction of staff, particularly in the Kimberley. We have increased rental subsidies for employees who relocate to regional towns and we have removed the fortnightly Government Regional Officers' Housing payments for employees in remote locations, which is critically important if we are going to attract and retain staff and encourage them to stay there.

In June last year, we announced a \$3.7 million regional attraction and retention initiative package for the Kimberley, the Pilbara, the midwest, the Gascoyne, the goldfields, Esperance and the wheatbelt. The member would be really happy to know that that package has made a difference. It topped up existing incentives for child protection workers to go to or stay in the Kimberley, amounting to an additional \$13 000 for each to stay there. It has had an impact. Since we made that announcement, an additional 40 child protection staff have chosen to relocate to or stay in the Kimberley. It is critically important, and we will keep working on that.

The member made a really important point in her grievance. It is not just about the Department of Communities; it is about other agencies working closely with not only my ministerial colleagues, but also, importantly, the place-based local community organisations. I particularly refer to the Aboriginal-controlled organisations. In the out-of-home care system, six of the 16 providers are now Aboriginal-controlled organisations. In terms of doing important work, supporting children and families so that we can keep children with their families, the communities partner really well with organisations such as Aarnja, which is delivering the Aboriginal representative organisations pilot in the Kimberley. We need to support kids in care so they remain connected to culture and their community. Those organisations deliver family finding and cultural care plans, which optimise the chances of reunification for those children because that is what we want to do. It is about early intervention, as the member mentioned, having all those wraparound services and supporting those organisations to do that important work of keeping young children safe.

I want to finish by saying that I spent three years in Fitzroy Crossing as a young teacher. I have spoken to child protection staff everywhere. They work in a challenging environment, but when they reflect on their work later, they realise that it was the most rewarding, professional and personal time of their lives. I will continue to fight every way I can to support people to go to the Kimberley to do this important work.