

HOMELESSNESS — VICTORIA PARK ELECTORATE

Grievance

MS H.M. BEAZLEY (Victoria Park) [10.06 am]: My grievance today is directed to the Minister for Housing and concerns homelessness in Victoria Park. Minister, like electorates across Australia, my electorate of Victoria Park is experiencing housing stress. I understand this is a nationwide phenomenon due to unexpected outcomes following the COVID pandemic. Third-party reports like that of Domain show that we have seen an increase in rents in WA and that rental vacancies remain very low. We know that the social housing waitlist is distinctly linked to the private market and that is why we are seeing high levels of demand for social housing. As the minister is aware, the complex economic circumstances currently facing the world have had a particular effect on some of the most vulnerable members of our community. Apart from rough sleepers, other cohorts are affected, including people living in overcrowded situations. Other significant cohorts in the homeless population are couch surfing, which makes their living situation very unstable. Victoria Park is an electorate that has rough sleepers. Victoria Park is an inner-city suburb connected to the Armadale train line, with major public facilities such as Bentley Hospital. My electorate is also well known as the home of a number of amazing community groups who do incredible work to support those experiencing housing vulnerability. These include the Haven Centre, Manna, Adira, Connect Victoria Park, Mission Australia, St Mary's Outreach Service, Uniting Care West and Sussex Street Community Law Service. Homelessness is an issue with many roots. It is often said that it requires a whole-of-community response. I know my constituents will agree with me when I say we have a fantastic and supportive community in Victoria Park.

When I speak to service providers within my electorate, they tell me the same thing: the current increase in rental fees, combined with local rental stock, has meant that housing stress is affecting broader demographics such as single women and the elderly. In fact, the University of Western Australia Centre for Social Impact released a report earlier this year in which it identified both housing affordability and housing supply as the top two driving factors behind homelessness. Other critical factors include poverty and unemployment, physical and mental health, alcohol and other drug use, and family and domestic violence. Given this last factor, it is somewhat fitting I make this grievance during the Department of Communities' 16 Days in WA to Stop Violence Against Women.

In my electorate office I have seen, as I am sure members in this place have seen, people from all walks of life who are experiencing housing stress due to the factors identified by the Centre for Social Impact. I would say that housing issues rate in the top three issues that my constituents bring to my attention. I would like to tell the house about one of these constituents, because his experience shows how vital access to stable housing is to our wellbeing.

I first met Rick when he was selling *The Big Issue* at the Victoria Park markets, and I was immediately drawn to his friendliness and decency. Rick has experienced intermittent homelessness for many years and in the past has been a rough sleeper. If you ask Rick, he will tell you that he made some friends for life while he lived on the streets, but the experience also caused him to experience deep depression, unemployment and addiction. Starting work with The Big Issue Australia—I acknowledge what a wonderful organisation The Big Issue is—helped Rick to turn his life around. The extra money that Rick earned through magazine sales helped him to find shared accommodation in a private rental. He continued to work, selling *The Big Issue*, and he was able to find employment as a porter at a Perth hotel. Unfortunately, a rise in rental costs meant that Rick's roommate could no longer afford his share of the rent and he moved out of the tenancy. Rick was unable to pay the complete rent alone and a few months ago he was evicted. Rick struggled to find accommodation in the current rental market with a poor tenancy record and casual employment, and, without someone to share with, most private rentals were beyond his means.

I catch up with Rick often, and he told me that he started to experience depression and a deep fear that his life was derailing again and that he would lose everything he had worked for. Fortunately for Rick, one of his lifelong friends who he had made while living on the streets—his street daughter, as he says—now had a home of her own and invited Rick to rent out one of her bedrooms. Rick has stable housing for now, but the Centre for Social Impact report identified that most individual rough sleepers like Rick experience homelessness for four and a half years over their lives.

I recognise the complexity of an issue like homelessness and that it requires a multifaceted approach. I ask the minister what the state government is doing to support those experiencing housing stress, particularly rough sleepers like Rick, because four and a half years is too long.

MR J.N. CAREY (Perth — Minister for Housing) [10.11 am]: I thank the member for her grievance and for her advocacy in the housing and homelessness space. As the member knows, we are genuinely using every lever we can to reduce homelessness and accelerate social housing. I note that recently, the new CEO of Shelter WA recognised the efforts of the government when we announced our latest round of community housing grants. In fact, I think she herself said that we are using every lever we can.

Our government understands that homelessness is a complex issue and it intersects with a range of issues such as deep trauma. As the member described with that particular resident and his story, the issues can range from family and domestic violence to mental health issues, drug and alcohol addiction or other issues. We acknowledge that

family and domestic violence is a significant contributor of homelessness for women, and that is why our government, led by Minister McGurk, is investing heavily in FDV prevention and support. We know that we need to provide long-term, sustainable housing—as the member described, secure housing—if we wish to reduce homelessness.

Our government has embraced a strategy that has been co-designed with the community housing and homelessness sectors and informed by the Housing First approach, and that is the proposition that we need to provide people with not only a roof over their head and long-term accommodation, but also intensive wraparound support so that they are able to sustain their tenancy. We need to get them into accommodation and provide access to mental health and other support services that are needed to assist them to sustain long-term housing.

In this financial year, we are investing \$225 million. That is an extraordinary investment. We are developing a range of infrastructure. We are building East Perth Common Ground, which will assist the member's community in Victoria Park. I have said on the record that we have hit construction issues. We have the hottest construction market on record, but we are back out to the market and we are working through that. We are also building three Aboriginal short-stay accommodation facilities in the regions, in Geraldton and Kununurra, and of course in Perth. That will provide some support accommodation. Last year, we actually added 102 crisis accommodation places for people who need critical and immediate assistance, and, of course, in the last two years we have opened Boorloo Bidee Mia, which has been an outstanding success as transitional accommodation.

Last week, I announced major reforms in the homelessness space. These are big reforms that are about consolidating our efforts and focusing on the Housing First approach. We are bringing together all these advisory groups into one group to advise the minister called the Housing First Homelessness Advisory Group. This group will meet regularly to provide strategic advice about policy implementation.

I also announced a \$24.2 million homelessness reform package. That will create rough sleeper coordination groups that will assess rough sleepers in Fremantle, Bunbury, Geraldton and Perth. We are also integrating outreach services in the CBD so that, ultimately, we will have one clear integrated service. Critically, we announced the 100 homes project, which is a supportive landlord model. We will spot purchase 50 properties, Housing Choices will bring 50 properties, we will provide the money for supported tenancy, and they will run those homes and provide the supportive landlord model, which is about having a landlord who understands the tenants' needs and works with them to stay in that housing. Those tenants can then also access Housing First support services—those wraparound support services. We also announced that we are expanding short to medium-term or transitional-term accommodation by providing an additional \$2.3 million to St Bart's for 18 additional beds. We also announced that we are extending the Safe Perth City initiative, particularly the Homeless Engagement Assessment Response Team. We have boosted that assertive outreach team so that it can now operate seven days a week with two mobile teams. We have also provided \$500 000 to continue to support the by-name list and improve data collection. We know that we need accurate data to inform our decisions. Of course, all those homelessness reforms are in addition to our ongoing package for social housing under which, since our new program, we have delivered 806 social houses and have 900 more under contract or construction. These are big changes and big reforms.

I note that only last week, Hon Steve Martin, a member of the opposition, said —

The homelessness numbers have come down in the last couple of years, which is good ...

He then continued. It is interesting that what Hon Steve Martin said is contradicted by what the opposition says in its social media. Members opposite have been out there saying that homelessness is going up, but we have the member in the upper house saying that—I quoted him—it is actually going down. We know that homelessness numbers fluctuate with winter and summer seasons. Member, I am very confident that the reforms that we are doing will deliver real results for the most vulnerable people in Western Australia.