

COMMUNITY SAFETY — FRONTLINE WORKERS AND VOLUNTEERS

Motion

MR R.S. LOVE (Moore — Leader of the Opposition) [5.43 pm]: I move —

That this house applauds our frontline workers and volunteers who work hard to keep Western Australians safe and notes that the Western Australian Labor government is failing in its promise to do so, instead continuing to disregard the concerns of frontline personnel.

Nothing illustrates the respect that Western Australians have for our volunteers, especially, and for our frontline paid personnel who battled the fires on the weekend and still battle to keep them under control. Despite the best efforts that they were able to muster, homes were unfortunately lost. Fortunately, no lives were lost, and we should be very grateful for that, considering the ferocity of the fires. It is a testament to the work of the paid and volunteer frontline personnel and to the work of the people who looked after pets and people when they were evacuated to make sure that they were safe. That was a great testament to the frontline personnel in our state, and it speaks well to this motion, which seeks to acknowledge the efforts of such people. This is not just about that incident. Right across our state, whenever there is an emergency, a fire, a flood, a cyclone, a traffic accident or a lost person, a volunteer or paid frontline worker is there to pick up the slack and make sure that people are safe or as safe as possible. I reiterate that nothing I talk about here takes away from the efforts of those frontline workers and the regard in which they should be held. We are talking about a very special group of tens of thousands of people across the state who work so hard to keep Western Australians safe in emergencies and in our health system. The member for Vasse will talk about some of the frontline workers in the health system as we go through the discussion.

Seven years into this Labor government, we see that the critical frontline workers who are doing such heavy lifting are often not well supported by the government. For instance, the preparedness of some aspects of our bush firefighting capacity is not necessarily as it should be, and that is the government's responsibility. It is not the responsibility of the volunteers or the workers in that sector.

I point to work that the shadow Minister for Emergency Services, Hon Martin Aldridge, has been doing in this regard. He has made it clear in some of his statements, in the numbers of questions that he has asked and in the numbers of inquiries he has made that there are chronic problems with staffing shortages and the age of the Department of Fire and Emergency Services operational fleet. From the work he has done, his view is that at the beginning of the bushfire season—we recently saw the dangers of that—DFES remains crippled because of staff shortages in crucial roles, such as technicians and auto-electricians. At the time of his very recent inquiries, a month or two ago in September at the beginning of spring, those levels were down to about 50 per cent of operational capacity. That means that the fleet is at risk of not being as prepared as it should be. I am not saying that they are not making the effort. This is about the resources that the organisation is putting towards the situation. Vacancies exist in the organisation. When he made those inquiries, 50 positions had been vacant for over a year. Critical roles had not been filled for over a year. Some of the staff roles include a breathing apparatus technician, which was vacant for more than 600 days; a mechanical technician role, which was vacant for more than 770 days; and an auto-electrician role, which was vacant for over 380 days. We see chronic staff shortages in key areas of frontline operational matters.

Nearly 200 trucks have exceeded their recommended service life, and dozens of them are over 20 years old. Although the Minister for Emergency Services might not think that is much of a problem, it certainly is if personnel are being sent out in vehicles that are not up to date. I am not making allegations of any sort because of the staff shortages, but when resources are not available, mistakes can be made. I point that out because that is the area for which the government is responsible. As has been famously said, the government minister does not hold the hose —

Several members interjected.

Point of Order

Ms L. METTAM: Deputy Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition is obviously not inviting interjections, and I cannot properly hear his contribution.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Thank you, Leader of the Liberal Party. There is no point of order. Carry on, Leader of the Opposition.

Debate Resumed

Mr R.S. LOVE: I thank you for your protection, Deputy Speaker.

There is a very famous comment—it became unfortunate—that the minister and Prime Minister do not hold the hose, but they supply the hose. They supply the money for the hose. They supply the support to make sure that the hose will have water coming out of it when it is plugged into a hydrant. If we do not get all those things right, it does not matter who is on the ground, they will not be able to contest the fire. Hon Martin Aldridge highlighted the failure of the minister to ensure that the proper resources were available so that the frontline people who are out there

risking their lives for the community were well supported. That is critically important, and the government needs to take heed of this because we know that the fire season in this year could well be very severe indeed.

Another matter that Hon Martin Aldridge has raised on behalf of emergency services personnel is the presumption regarding post-traumatic stress disorder. Ambulance paramedics were granted extended protection for PTSD from February 2022 and career firefighters from May 2023, but volunteers who are on the front line beside those career firefighters do not have the same presumption. After denying this for the Western Australia Police Force, earlier this week the Premier did a backflip and said that he will allow police officers that presumption. It is a welcome thing. I am glad that that has happened. It should have happened earlier. The point is that Hon Martin Aldridge has on occasions been raising this issue and, in fact, sought to make amendments to the Workers Compensation and Injury Management Bill, which would have increased protections for those volunteers who were diagnosed with PTSD. That would have brought all the emergency services into line with one another. The presumption of PTSD protection will alleviate some of the burden of proof regarding a person's condition when they are seeking some sort of compensation or treatment. Without that presumption, they will have delays and costs, and they may not be able to receive the support that they are asking for.

Last month, an open letter signed by various organisations, which together represented 26 000 volunteers, called for this matter to be dealt with. I have a copy of the State Emergency Service Volunteers Association of WA newsletter and it is signed by bushfire volunteers, SES volunteers and a whole range of other volunteer fire and rescue services people. Reading from that, Volunteer Marine Rescue Western Australia was also involved and the Volunteer Fire and Rescue Services Association of WA. They said —

We express our profound disappointment and concern over the recent decision made by the Labor government, in collaboration with the Greens, to vote ... against the amendment proposed by the Opposition to extend presumptive PTSD protection to our dedicated emergency service volunteers. The same volunteers who tirelessly serve our communities day in and day out and save the state more than 2 billion dollars per year.

Mr M.J. Folkard: I don't recall seeing this letter!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Burns Beach.

Mr M.J. Folkard: What a load of nonsense.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member!

Mr R.S. LOVE: Thank you, Deputy Speaker.

These combined organisations represent 26 000 people.

Mr M.J. Folkard: No! Pretends to represent. It pretends!

The DEPUTY SPEAKER: Member for Burns Beach!

Mr R.S. LOVE: These are the people who put their time aside and take risks to ensure that their communities are safe. Often, they may well be the only people who, for a considerable length of time, can respond to a situation because, as we know, some areas are more isolated from help than others.

I will move to the issue of the shortage of ambulance volunteers in our state. In many country areas—I had some information here, but it does not really matter—over the half a dozen years or so the volunteer ambulance services in electorates such as mine have been extremely stressed. We have seen a dramatic fall in the number of available volunteers, which puts pressure back on the volunteers who remain. This puts the community at greater risk because there could well be a considerable length of time between a call-out and an ambulance arriving. Recently, one of the longest-serving doctors in my electorate of Moora wrote to me, with great concern, about how much risk was being placed on the community because of the shortage of ambulance volunteers. In North Midlands, between Moora and Geraldton, a number of smaller communities, such as Perenjori, Morawa, Three Springs, Mingenew et cetera, have very real pressures on their ambulance services.

In March 2019, the WA Country Health Service did a review, which was endorsed, on having a sustainable ambulance service in country areas. I think the government, through WACHS, needs to continually revisit that idea to ensure that the country areas have a sustainable ambulance service because in some of the areas that I represent, the ambulance providers and volunteers themselves are coming to me saying that they do not believe they can guarantee their communities will be safe under these current arrangements. This is not me saying this; this is the doctors and ambos themselves telling me that they do not have a view that their communities are being kept safe at the moment. The government will say that that is just the word of volunteer organisations, but the government, through WACHS, is the one who is ultimately responsible to ensure that the health system works in those regional areas.

One of the concerns is that many, many volunteer hours are chewed up in patient transfers between hospitals in those smaller centres and smaller nursing posts, or from smaller hospitals to a major hospital in Geraldton, Perth or even Northam. Although some of the ambulance services are happy for that to happen, because they get paid

to do that, and it helps pay for their ambulance et cetera, it eventually chews up the volunteers' energy, so those volunteers are becoming much more stressed and there are fewer on the ground. Something has to happen. In some of those towns there is no operational ambulance because there is simply no-one to run it. WACHS will have to look into this issue to ensure that, going forward, we are confident that our communities are safe.

Another matter of grave concern to my communities at the moment is the changeover in the provision of services in a number of nursing posts and smaller medical centres with Silver Chain withdrawing from providing that service. There are 11 centres across Western Australia. Most of them are in the wheatbelt or in the midwest; four are in the electorate of Moore, another four are in the Central Wheatbelt and the rest are spread across the state with one in Roe, one in Kalgoorlie and one in North West Central. This is an issue of concern for those communities. I have been contacted by people who are very concerned about whether there will be a continuation of the service that they have had from Silver Chain in those communities. Some of them are not that small and not that remote. I will list the towns: Shark Bay, Leeman, Eneabba, Mingenew, Lancelin, Bencubbin, Beacon, Brookton, Hyden, Walpole and Eucla. There will be an impact pretty much from the furthest west to the furthest east of the state and pretty well the entirety of the south west land division.

Today the member for Central Wheatbelt asked the minister a question in this place: would the minister guarantee that the service level would be maintained in those centres? Disappointingly, we did not get that guarantee. We did not even get a guarantee from the minister to say she would look closely at it to ensure that what could be done, would be done. Instead, we were left with a very airy statement about stress in the health system and difficulty in staffing across the state, which left me with no confidence whatsoever that we will see a system where those Silver Chain centres will be staffed in the way they have been before.

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Mr R.S. LOVE: We understand that Silver Chain is pulling out, minister. I am not denying that, but someone has to step in —

Mr P. Papalia interjected.

Point of Order

Dr D.J. HONEY: I have a point of order. The member is not accepting interjections and the minister will be responding in short order.

The SPEAKER: Minister, you will have the opportunity to respond, I hope. Leader of the Opposition.

Debate Resumed

Mr R.S. LOVE: Those communities are looking at a changeover that is happening around March. They have great uncertainty whether they will be receiving services after that simple request for the minister to guarantee that services will continue. In the main, these are WA Country Health Service facilities. The situation at Lancelin has been a bit of an oddball one for years in my view. Within the Shire of Gingin, a shire of around 6 000 people, there is no public health facility that is run by WACHS to my knowledge. It has a nursing post in Lancelin but it has been run under a contract with Silver Chain. The miserable nature of that contract over the years I think has led to the situation that Silver Chain consider it is no longer viable to continue. I have raised that with numerous ministers over the years and, unfortunately, we have not seen much of a result.

We know our health system and our frontline services that keep us safe have been under a lot of stress. Through COVID, the nurses and police kept Western Australia strong. They kept order in the state and had to undertake new roles that they had not done before. Their roles changed and the way they went about their business to deal with the need to wear more protective clothing, to lockdown areas of the state, to keep tabs on where people were and to run a new system of identification of citizens, following them wherever they went into shops through the apps that people were required to use. It was unprecedented and it put a lot of stress on those personnel. As we know, as we come out of that situation, there has been general acceptance that there has been a rise in mental health issues. That has led to a lack of respectful behaviour towards police and nurses in hospital systems. Those two groups especially have been voicing concerns to the government about the support they are getting, their working conditions and their remuneration. There is also a feeling of lack of respect as much as anything else from this government. It does not seem to want to listen to the point that I understand the nurses at least are looking at running candidates for Parliament at the 2025 election because they obviously feel that is the only way they are going to be heard. They are looking at the government at the moment and saying "These people are not listening. Here's an opportunity with the change this government put in place with a lower quota to get a seat in the upper house." That had been the case before. Nurses are thinking that perhaps the best way forward for them is to be directly represented in Parliament. People in the police force are also talking about that. I do not know whether that eventuated but it was certainly a topic of discussion for the police. They were to discuss a motion at their recent conference. I have not seen an announcement about the result of that, but I dare say we will know in the fullness of time, or the minister may be able to enlighten us where that went. The point is that the police who put that motion forward did not feel

supported. They did not feel they had a government that had their backs and they felt they had to directly address issues in the Parliament of Western Australia. That is very disappointing for them to feel undervalued and they felt they had to take that path forward.

I had talked about the situation with emergency services volunteers. I also want to point out very quickly something that has been raised in this place on a number of occasions. The government has gagged the volunteers who work under the Department of Fire and Emergency Services umbrella from talking to members of Parliament. For the life of me, I have never been able to understand why the government felt that was appropriate. The code of conduct that all the volunteers in those organisations are forced to sign prohibits them from talking to members of Parliament. It seems odd to me. It often appears it applies only to members of Parliament who are not members of the Labor Party, because certainly during cyclone Seroja, I was refused access to community hubs and other government facilities that were providing services to my constituents, yet Labor MPs were being used as a conduit for information. People were told to send their concerns directly to a member of Parliament who was not the local member of Parliament but an upper house member of the Labor Party.

Mr W.J. Johnston interjected.

Mr R.S. LOVE: That is a fact, minister.

We have consistently asked in this place over the last six years that the ban be reconsidered. I remember the former member for Warren–Blackwood, Hon Terry Redman, having a good old exchange in this place with the then Minister for Emergency Services, the former member for Cockburn. It has been going on ever since. Members on this side are denied access to facilities. They are not invited to go to facility openings et cetera but that is not the issue. The issue is that the people who are in those organisations need to be able to address their concerns to members of Parliament. If they do not feel safe in the organisation and they want to come to a member of Parliament and talk about that, they should be able to. If they do not feel that the conditions they are working in are appropriate, even as a volunteer, and they want to directly address that with their member of Parliament, they should be able to. To me that is one of the most telling indicators of a government that does not want to see accountability or an effective representation of issues that they find inconvenient. It does not like listening to members from this side bringing forward the issues of concern that exist in those organisations. The government has consistently sought to silence the voices of the 26 000 volunteers who are affected by those codes of conduct. Why on earth it is deemed to be appropriate for a volunteer to talk to a member who happens to be a member of a party that is in government, but not appropriate to talk to a member who is a member of the opposition is beyond me. I think it is abhorrent and I give the commitment that in any government I am a part of, I will not stand for that to be the case. Labor members on the other side would be able to speak to those volunteers, as they should.

MS M. BEARD (North West Central) [6.10 pm]: I rise to make a really short contribution to the motion. I acknowledge many of the challenges faced by the frontline people and services right across the state. In saying that, I also acknowledge the challenges that we have faced with in managing and providing for all those frontline people.

I first acknowledge the incredible work that our frontline workers undertake with incredible dedication and commitment, often going well above and beyond the call of duty. In regional areas, where I come from, and extremely remote areas, this is often with very limited resources and a diminishing number of volunteers. One of the towns in my electorate was down to two volunteer ambos. Both them were away so people hoped and prayed nothing would happen over that weekend. In the event that it did, it would be a very long wait for the Royal Flying Doctor Service or someone travelling long distances from another town. When we talk about getting assistance for frontline people, these frontline people are just as stressed when they cannot be there. The member for Moore touched on the issue of the diminishing numbers and it is absolutely a problem in these areas. The volunteers' mental health is affected by this as well.

Perth is a long way from the north. The further away we are, the less reliable services are, for obvious reasons, and it becomes more complex and less consistent. It impacts our retention on population across the regions, with people feeling that the services are not there to support their families if they are to move there. They also have problems with understanding how they will be taken care of if a specialist is a long way away. For example, a constituent has a child who needs attention urgently regularly; it is not a reason to move to a location if they cannot access the relevant doctors.

The member for Moore touched on this matter; I also find it amazing that as members of Parliament we are not allowed to enter a lot of the voluntary services. I get that regularly from groups, such as the State Emergency Service; they cannot understand why we cannot visit their premises and attend some of their functions. These rescue services are critical. The ambulance officers, the police and the firefighters are absolute heroes and they need support and to have someone to speak to. Sometimes they are in a bad place. They just need a conversation. That person needs to be there and be accessible. I understand exactly what the member for Moore was commenting on, because this happens regularly. In small communities, being a volunteer is stressful because often they know the person whom

they are rescuing. Depending on what they are attending, it can be really, really life-changing for those people. Suicide and mental health is a major issue in the regions and something that all these frontline people have to grapple with. Having that support for them is crucial.

I am going to touch on the safe house that I spoke about in question time today. I have highlighted this issue in here for a long time and many people in the community have highlighted it as well. It is a crucial facility. Yes, there are services and facilities that everyone needs to work with, and I have admiration for all those services and programs that are in place. I thank the minister for having those in place, but this safe house is really something that will be life-changing for a lot of these children.

In the case of domestic violence, someone not being able to take their 12-year-old child to the refuge overnight is potentially resulting in people not leaving vulnerable situations. This safe house, hopefully, would cater for that cohort of children along with those ones who are on the streets at all hours of the night and need a safe space and somewhere to go. The street patrols do a fabulous job in the north and they keep the streets as safe as they can until 10 o'clock at night. After that time, they are looking for a safe space to take these children because they often cannot find somewhere to take them. It is crucial. I think that police are in the same situation. They can talk to the kids on the street. They will tell me that they speak to them, but they do not have anywhere to take them. I think if we are serious about keeping these kids safe, it needs to be prioritised. In all these towns there needs to be somewhere at that critical time—late into the night and in the early mornings—where they can go and we can protect them.

I refer to domestic violence and the refuge in Carnarvon. There needs to be a transitional house and the facilitators are looking at ways of creating one so that people do not have to go straight from the refuge back into the situation they came from. I refer to the drug and alcohol centre in the town. There is anecdotal information that drug use, particularly in Carnarvon, is increasing. I know it is across the towns, from what I am hearing. However, the drug and alcohol centre in the town of Carnarvon is open for only part of the week. That is a wraparound service that we need to make sure we ramp up to support these frontline people who are dealing with these issues. Again a lot of those are volunteers. They are picking these people up and it is really tricky for them if there is nowhere to take them to other than the hospital. That is a specific service that can be ramped up.

I refer to community safety. Right across our state, and in the north, it is often the volunteers who are dealing with some of these situations and are needing the assistance.

I refer to education in schools. I heard the previous private member's business motion that was spoken about. I think some members touched on bringing back the old ways of teaching. My understanding from where I live and I come from is that the cohorts of kids in classrooms are vastly different. Some kids have spent eight days in one year in a classroom. They are eight years old and they get returned to a grade 3 classroom when they have done only a month of schooling in their lifetime. It is creating issues. It is creating anger with those children who do not know how to react because they do not feel comfortable in that space. My take on that is we need to also investigate other ways for certain cohorts of these children in these areas which are of concern to find educational pathways. Some of the educators I have spoken to in my region at times feel like they are not getting the support levels that they need. They are feeling vulnerable at times.

As the member for Moore touched on, health is also an issue. We have the Meekatharra Hospital, Tom Price Hospital and Paraburdoo Hospital projects and a number of other projects. People are working in tired and old facilities, which is also putting stress on those frontline people. The nursing posts have been touched on, but for me, mental health and suicide really is something that we need to address, particularly in the regions. It is a massive issue. Those frontline people again need additional support in that area.

I would also like to make a last point. One of the observations that a lot of people make, and I have noticed, is that a large number of the regional managers have been centralised to locations a very long way from these towns, which is making them inaccessible. I think for the frontline people who work in those departments, without the senior regional managers in those towns it is really difficult to get guidance and direction in some really tricky situations. I encourage the government to consider returning some of the senior regional managers into some of those towns, which I think will give those people on the front line a lot more support and a direct line to report to. I will leave it there and pass on to my colleagues.

DR D.J. HONEY (Cottesloe) [6.19 pm]: At the outset, I wish to echo the comments made by the Leader of the Opposition that we have the highest regard for frontline workers in the state of Western Australia. In many ways, we critically depend on them for all the services they provide. It is interesting that the Labor Party portrays itself as a friend and the party that champions the workers. We hear a lot about that in opposition, but in government, it is anything but.

I will start by talking about a couple of issues that highlight the disregard that the Cook Labor government has for workers in Western Australia. I go back to the tragic and unfortunate death of Aishwarya Aswath in Perth Children's Hospital in April 2021. We on this side understand that children and people die in hospitals; that is an unfortunate

fact of medical centres, in particular in relation to the illness suffered by that poor young child. What is the appropriate response to that as a government? The appropriate response is to carry out a detailed investigation, following which appropriate actions are taken. What happened under this Cook Labor government? We saw the young nurses and doctors get thrown under a bus, being referred to the Australian Health Practitioner Regulation Agency before the investigation in the hospital was even completed. I spoke with the medical staff, as did the Leader of the Liberal Party. They were utterly gutted and betrayed. They felt that they were being victimised and the government was making a scapegoat of them. The ministers in this place made the point that they did not make the referral but, boy, I think they came into this place with glee, talking about that referral and implying in some way that Aishwarya's death was caused by a failure of the staff. Subsequent investigations revealed that that was an absolute lie. There were system failures. Staff were massively overworked. The now Premier claimed in this place that there were appropriate staffing levels in that hospital. In fact, there were not appropriate staffing levels in that hospital.

Subsequently, a coronial inquiry was conducted, which made a number of findings. The Cook Labor government said that it would implement those findings. I stand to be corrected, but I think we are still waiting for some of those recommended changes to be implemented in the hospital system.

The government blamed the frontline workers. I hear the Minister for Health and others saying from time to time that they value the nurses. The minister tells us in this place how wonderful the nurses are but when it is convenient, ministers came into this place and blamed the workers. The doctors and nurses have not forgotten that at all. They know how they were treated. They know how they felt when they were thrown under the bus and when there were systemic failures, which were under the control of the government.

Let us look at where we are with nurses and the pay dispute that is still unresolved. Our nurses were the best paid in Australia in 2017. Now our nurses are the worst paid in Australia.

Mr W.J. Johnston: That's not true.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I will respond to that interjection directly. The government plays this game, saying that that is not true, which the Minister for Energy said while sitting across the chamber. He should look at the detail. He is a detail minister. He should look at the relative comparison and the ratings that are used across Australia. If he looks at the substantial grouping of nurses and the substantial number of nurses in those groupings, he would see that our nurses are the worst paid in Australia. That is a simple fact.

Mr W.J. Johnston interjected.

The SPEAKER: Minister for Energy, there should be time for you to contribute to the debate if you would like to. You have made your point in response to the member for Cottesloe repeatedly. I do not think it advances anything to continue to repeat it.

Dr D.J. HONEY: What was the response of this government about the workers? It threatened the nurses union with deregistration. It stopped the Your Voice in Health survey. It is now back. I want to talk about that a little. The government was so embarrassed by the results of that survey, which proved how those nurses were being mistreated, that it stopped the survey. Now it has brought it back. I will reflect on some of the outcomes now that it has been reinstated after a substantial hiatus and when the government simply did not hear from the nurses. I will provide some of the results from the latest Your Voice in Health survey. Only 47 per cent of nurses felt their employer cared about their health and wellbeing. Almost one in four believed their leaders were being honest in their communication with staff. Almost one in four believed that. Just over half said their employer inspires them to do their best job. Only 55 per cent felt decisions and behaviours of senior management were consistent with the organisation's values. The most terrifying result of that latest survey is that 55 per cent disagreed with the statement that it was safe to speak up and challenge the way things are done. That is more than half. Imagine that! More than half the nurses surveyed did not believe they could safely speak up. Imagine a clinical environment in which people speak up! That is absolutely pivotal to the best delivery of health services to people. Over 55 per cent of nurses felt that it was safe to speak up. No wonder the nurses are now forming their own political party. They feel so betrayed by this Labor government that they need their own voice to get their views heard. This Labor government has shown complete disrespect for those frontline health staff and our hospital workers.

I want to focus on doctors for a couple of minutes. It does not get much airing in this place but the way junior clinicians are treated in the hospital system by the Cook Labor government is an absolute disgrace. They are forced to work appalling hours and do appalling amounts of overtime. They are constantly on call. They cannot take breaks because there is a complete under-resourcing of doctors in hospitals. A large majority of young clinicians in our hospitals are constantly working on six-month or one-year contracts. I have spoken to clinicians in their seventh, eighth and later years in the hospital system who have never been on a contract for more than one year. I am sure that the Minister for Industrial Relations, wearing his industrial relations hat and his former union hat, would think that was appalling for any other worker. Those clinicians that we rely on in our hospital system are being abused in that way. They have no job certainty. They never know whether they will have a job because they are constantly on short contracts. Talk about treating those clinicians with disrespect. All other public servants got the \$3 000 bonus

after the COVID pandemic and after pay rises were restricted. All other public servants got those pay rises. Do members know who did not get those pay rises? The young doctors and clinicians in our hospitals were denied the \$3 000 cash payment. They were absolutely denied it.

Mr W.J. Johnston: It's not true.

Dr D.J. HONEY: The minister can sit there and say that but it is absolutely the case. What an absolute disgrace by this Labor government. That is not how we treat workers with respect. There is no respect in the way that those young clinicians are treated by this government. They are among the lowest paid clinicians in Australia. For example, in Tasmania, the equivalent rates are about 20 per cent above the rates in Western Australia.

We have the issue with the police, which has already been covered in some part. We have a minister who likes to talk up law and order, yet the pay deal for the police has still not been resolved.

Mr W.J. Johnston: Yes, we have. The agreement's been registered. It was registered ages ago.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I stand to be corrected. I am happy to know that. It took an enormous period of time before —

Mr R.S. Love: They have voted to form their own political party.

Dr D.J. HONEY: I am about to come to that. An enormous period of time elapsed before that was the case. Again, the WA Police Union was so dismayed with its treatment by this Labor government that it is talking about forming its own political party. The government has come around. There has been a failure to keep our community safe, with record rates of serious crime. There is understaffing in our jails and enormous pressure on the frontline staff in our jails. We hear this story constantly; that is, the outstanding individuals who make up the staff in our jails, who work in the most enormously difficult circumstances, are under enormous pressure because they do not have adequate staffing. That sits at the feet of this Labor government. The reality is that under the Cook Labor government, Western Australians are less safe, and people are waiting longer than ever to be treated when they arrive at hospitals by ambulance and longer than ever to be treated for serious conditions.

The government says that it cares about frontline workers, but how did it treat St John Ambulance when it expressed concern about delays and ambulance ramping? The government launched an upper house inquiry to intimidate St John Ambulance. In July 2021, I believe, the government launched that inquiry into St John Ambulance to intimidate it because it did not like the fact that it was telling the truth about what is happening with ramping at hospitals. Those volunteers and permanent ambulance staff felt that they were being intimidated by this government. That is how this Labor government treats frontline workers. It does not treat frontline workers in this state with respect. The Labor Party does not live up to its promise to be the friend of workers. When the Labor Party is in government, it is quite the opposite.

MS L. METTAM (Vasse — Leader of the Liberal Party) [6.31 pm]: I rise to make a brief contribution to this debate in order to allow the minister to provide a response in the time remaining. I certainly back and commend the other members of the opposition for making such valuable contributions to this debate. As the Leader of the Opposition and other opposition members have stated, we are very supportive of the outstanding work that our frontline workers in this state undertake in a range of portfolios.

A particular focus I have had as shadow Minister for Health has obviously been the health portfolio. As the member for Cottesloe has highlighted, the way this critical workforce has been treated under the Cook Labor government has been absolutely disgraceful. The Your Voice in Health survey highlighted that morale has been at an all-time low under this government, with just one-third of this critical health workforce feeling safe about speaking up, and many not feeling comfortable or supported in their workforce. Also, the nurse and health workforce at Perth Children's Hospital was, effectively, thrown under the bus in the wake of the tragedy surrounding Aishwarya Aswath before the conclusions of the investigation of that tragedy were made, with a coronial inquest highlighting significant systemic failings.

The SPEAKER: Attorney General, if you could keep your voice down or have your conversation elsewhere, please. Leader of the Liberal Party.

Ms L. METTAM: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

We have a hospital system under extraordinary pressure as well, with a workforce working in conditions highlighting a lack of resourcing. Let us not forget that in 2017 our now Premier told Western Australians that the former government was failing in the health portfolio. I quote the Premier at that time. He said —

... record ambulance ramping, record waitlists and ... no plan for healthcare in WA ...

That is how he framed the so-called failings of the former government. The inconvenient truth for our now Premier is that in 2017 ambulances were ramped for around for 9 834 hours, and this year to date they were ramped for 47 190 hours. That represents a 380 per cent increase, highlighting a real failure of the government on health and supporting these health workers. That is certainly at the foot of this government. Also on this government's watch,

the elective surgery waitlist has increased to 52 per cent higher than in 2017, with 30 000 people now waiting for surgery, or 10 000 more than when this government took over the health portfolio. That is just one area. As the member for Cottesloe has highlighted, under this government's watch we have a workforce that has gone from being the highest paid in the country to the lowest.

We have significant issues with safety at Perth Children's Hospital. I have touched on the tragedy of Aishwarya Aswath while she was waiting for assistance. As the member for Cottesloe has stated, there are still recommendations of the coronial and other reports to that matter that have not been addressed, with there yet to be a supernumerary resuscitation team put in place. That was a key recommendation. We heard of a 13-year-old girl allegedly being raped in a mental health ward. About two years after that alleged incident took place, the key recommendation about the safety of the environment is yet to be addressed. There were recent reports of a family with a 10-year-old boy who was turned away from hospital five times despite him attempting suicide several times and being a danger to his family. This is simply not good enough.

Of course, another frontline service is police, which I imagine the Minister for Police will highlight and focus on in his response. We have had a number of concerns about the lack of support for our police force. There has been an exodus of police officers leaving the force, in fact, the largest number in the state's 189-year history. This police force is under extraordinary pressure. The number of officers who have resigned is about three times the average for a year. It is not good enough. Under Labor's watch we have seen extraordinary pressure. We could be doing so much better in law and order. There is no doubt that our frontline police officers feel let down when it comes to law and order. There has been a 45 per cent increase in domestic violence offences compared with 2017. We have seen the tragedy of 15 women who have died in domestic violence homicides since the beginning of this year. There has also been a 29 per cent increase in assaults and a 43 per cent increase in robberies, which are significant increases.

This week we welcomed the government's imminent introduction of GPS legislation for those who breach violence restraining orders. It is something the opposition has been calling for since the trial into this matter was completed in 2022, after beginning in 2020. There has been a great need for some urgency around that. I leave my comments there. I appreciate that the Minister for Police will now respond to the opposition's motion. We commend the outstanding efforts of our frontline officers, but we argue that they have been let down by the Cook Labor government.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Police) [6.39 pm]: I appreciate the opportunity to address and correct this motion because although parts of it are quite clearly correct and reasonable and deserve to be lauded, I intend to amend the rest of it by removing some words.

Amendment to Motion

Mr P. PAPALIA: I move —

To delete all words after "safe".

The motion will then read —

That this house applauds our frontline workers and volunteers who work hard to keep Western Australians safe.

This amendment is an undeniable recognition of the extraordinary effort that continues to be contributed by our frontline workers right across the state in just about every sector in confronting any type of challenge, the likes of which we have seen in recent years. I want to address in particular the excellent work and service rendered to the state by the Western Australia Police Force as a matter of course and up-front, because obviously I have the police portfolio. Speaker, you obviously have an interest in this issue. I want to immediately correct the misleading of the house that occurred earlier when the Leader of the Opposition was on his feet. The Leader of the Opposition reflected on an announcement made by the Premier that amounted to a very significant commitment made almost immediately after it was requested by the WA Police Union. I attended the morning session of the eighty-seventh police union conference. The president of the police union, Paul Gale, got to his feet, and in the course of his speech, he made a request of the government. It was the first time I had heard about it. To my knowledge, the issue had not been in the public domain prior to that time. I meet with Paul regularly in my office. We have regular meetings, during which he raises matters with me. I do not recall him having said to me that he would appreciate it if the government would consider a presumption of PTSD in the same fashion that had been afforded to professional firefighters and ambulance paramedics.

The first thing to note is that the recognition of presumption was not in any way considered or delivered during the eight and a half years of the former Liberal-National government.

Mr W.J. Johnston: They didn't even get compensation.

Mr P. PAPALIA: No compensation for the police—we know that—but they did not do that for firefighters and paramedics despite having gone through the 2008–2012 boom, during which time the National Party was given

all manner of funding to waste on extraordinary projects such as singing toilets and the planting of petunias down the streets of some regional towns. It would have been far better if the National Party had been focused on things like housing for children who live on the streets of Carnarvon, which is what we are hearing about now. Perhaps it would have been better if they had considered things like alcohol restrictions in towns riven by the damages caused by the harmful use of alcohol. Perhaps if it had considered those things, we might not have heard members of the Liberal Party or the Nationals WA—I am not sure which one it was—complaining about the situation now confronted by some towns. That aside, what I want to place absolutely on the record is that the former Liberal–National government had eight and a half years to consider things of this nature, but it did nothing. It was the Cook government that recognised the presumption of PTSD for professional firefighters and paramedics. Just this week at the morning session of the police union conference, the president raised a request that the government consider it. The Premier attended the police union conference in the afternoon, and, in front of the delegates, the board and the president, Paul Gale, he committed to the presumption of PTSD for police officers.

As the Minister for Energy indicated, that comes on top of and in the wake of the first government in history to not reject a request for police compensation. We remember that long ago, the repeated response of the Barnett government, the Liberals and Nationals, to the police union request for compensation was that police officers would necessarily have to relinquish their entitlements if they were to be given some form of compensation. That did not happen until WA Labor came to office. Prior to WA Labor coming to office, the Speaker, then the shadow Minister for Police, took Medically Retired WA Police Officers Association representatives to the state Labor Party conference. In front of a mass of workers, none of whom were affiliated with the police union, they put their case and requested recognition and compensation. The WA Labor state conference passed a unanimous motion supporting the plea from the medically retired police association.

When we came to office, the now Speaker took up that case and addressed the challenge of how police officers had been so terribly treated in the past when they were medically retired by being given a section 8. They were dealt with under a section 8, which is essentially the part of the act that is used to sack officers who have broken the law or behaved inappropriately. They were treated in exactly the same fashion. The now Speaker addressed that issue, and it was the McGowan government that fixed that issue. It introduced a scheme to recognise many of the police officers who, in the past, had been medically retired and had received no compensation. This redress scheme was again delivered by the now Speaker and the McGowan government.

More recently, we finally fixed the appalling situation that had existed since Federation and absolutely went through the entire tenure of the Barnett government. During the former Liberal–National government’s eight and half years, ministers responded to requests from the police union and injured police officers by saying that it was impossible to afford a compensation scheme without them having to relinquish their additional entitlements to health care. We fixed that.

Premier Cook attended the police union’s annual conference and, having heard only in the morning that there was a request to consider the presumption of PTSD, he gave a commitment that afternoon. It was stated erroneously and misleadingly earlier in the debate that Premier Cook had backflipped in some way. The fact is that the Liberal and National Parties have never delivered on the wellbeing of police officers in Western Australia. WA Labor has done that and it will continue to do that. This is an important thing to note. I was not really listening to every part of the contributions by the Leader of the Liberal Party and the member for Cottesloe, but I do recall hearing the word “police” thrown around amongst other words. I think that there was some suggestion, particularly from the member for Cottesloe, that there was a need to care more for police officers. I absolutely agree. We should always be doing more, but I can report to the house, and I was happy to report to the WA Police Union’s eighty-seventh conference, that since the McGowan and Cook governments came to office, an extraordinary amount has been done, particularly under the leadership of police commissioners Dawson and Blanch. An extraordinary amount of work has been done to shift the culture of mental health injury, exposure to trauma and the consequences of it. It is not just about physical injury. A huge amount has been done to shift that culture in the Western Australia Police Force. Also, the services and supports afforded to our police have dramatically increased.

I can recall that when I was first elected in 2007, I was invited by the then police chaplain, Keith Carmody. The Speaker would know Keith; he is a bit of a legend. He was the only police chaplain the Western Australia Police Force had. That was only in 2007 that it had one chaplain. I can tell members that today it has six chaplains, including two women, and a 24/7 chaplaincy response to any traumatic event confronting a police officer anywhere in the state. Members can imagine that there are many of those events. We are talking about serious traffic crashes in which people are very frequently killed, maimed or left with serious injuries. There are firearms incidents. Sadly, there are many incidents of self-harm, suicide and the like. Often, incidents involve people of all ages, and police confront those situations without notice. It is a fact that they play a challenging and very confronting role.

We now have the capacity to respond immediately with a chaplain. This is not necessarily about religion. The chaplains are very much like what I was familiar with from the military chaplaincy. They deliver someone on the ground in the uniform. A couple of these guys are former police officers, but they are not all; it is not a universal

experience. They are all mature, capable, trained and empathetic people whose immediate presence is calming. Since the 24/7 response has been rolled out, I have had feedback about just how effective it is. Their presence induces a degree of calm that was not there prior to their arrival and was never available in the past, unless the one chaplain—or whatever number of chaplains there were—happened to be around. Now, police know that there is a person who cares, is capable and is able to advise, support and guide them towards any further assistance they might require.

I can confirm this because I call every police officer who receives medical attention for an injury in the line of duty. I said this to the union the other day, too. I now know that by the time I call, the commissioner has personally spoken to the officer. Before he called, the district superintendent and very often some of the other officers in the chain of command have spoken to the officer. This is beyond confirmation of the care exhibited by the presence of a 24/7 police chaplain. In fairness, very often the union has also called. There is tangible evidence and confirmation that people care more for every officer who confronts an injury. I hear that every time I talk to officers in this situation; they recognise that something has changed dramatically. It was not that long ago that this did not happen. Not that long ago, people did not talk about exposure to trauma, the effect that might have on them at the time and the effect it might have on them in the future. That is shifting and changing dramatically, and it is a good thing.

We have more than doubled the number of uniformed officers in our health, welfare and safety division. We have more than doubled the number of psychologists and counsellors employed in-house. In addition, external authorised providers across the entire state are funded by Western Australia Police Force, and officers are able to refer themselves without having to reveal to their command or their workplace the nature of their referral. That is something that was not there at anywhere near the scale it is now. Right across the state, that has dramatically shifted. We are talking about only five or six years, really.

Beyond that, there is one thing I am very proud of the Western Australia Police Force for having done in recent years. There was a program, which I think might have been initiated the last time we were in government, called the peer support program. Officers who volunteer are spread across workplaces across the entire state, in different districts, subdistricts and divisions. They are given three days of training to enhance their capacity, awareness and recognition of issues and to enable them to provide assistance and support to workplace colleagues who might have been exposed to trauma that may result in subsequent suffering. That program fell by the wayside for many years. I do not know when that happened, but I know that Commissioner Dawson reinvigorated support for it. I can tell members that we now have doubled the number of officers. I believe that about 200 officers across the state have had that training. They wear a badge so people know who they are in the workplace. It means that that intervention and support is provided, and the opportunity to seek assistance from a work colleague who is doing the same task but has had additional training to enable them to assist officers is afforded to them like never before. From my experience and in my view, this type of response to traumatic injury, trauma exposure or subsequent potential mental health injury is the single most effective response people can have. If people in the workplace are afforded extra capabilities through training and support and may be able to refer people to external authorities and supports, that is the best response. It is the response that people in the job on the front line—the people we are acknowledging and thanking—are most likely to choose and seek assistance from, rather than from some other professionals. Even though we have massively increased their opportunity to receive assistance from other professionals, it is probably more likely that they will seek assistance in a timely fashion from their work colleagues. That is a good thing.

I want to convey to the house and reassure them that things have dramatically changed. They are undeniably far better than they were under the last Liberal–National government. That does not mean that it has ended, that there is not a lot more to do, or that we should not get up every day and marshal ourselves to effect better change and look for better opportunities and more things we can do. That is undeniably the truth. We need to do that as well. We need to recognise that the Western Australia Police Force, particularly the command of the Western Australia Police Force, has done an extraordinary job in the last half a decade of transforming the response to officers exposed to trauma—in a good way. It is a good thing. There is always more to be done, and we will do more, but it should be recognised that we have come a long way in a relatively short period.

With respect to the other frontline services, we should be and are thankful. This government absolutely recognises the contribution made by our frontline services in recent years. As we confront another very potentially challenging fire season, all of our thoughts are with the people who are out there and will be out on the front line keeping all of us safe.

Debate adjourned, pursuant to standing orders.

House adjourned at 7.00 pm
