

EQUINE-ASSISTED THERAPY

Grievance

MS C.M. ROWE (Belmont) [9.16 am]: My grievance today is to the Minister for Veterans Issues and relates to equine therapy and its profound benefits, especially for those with mental health issues such as anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress syndrome. I would like to highlight how equine therapy can be used to provide assistance to our veterans, who have served our nation.

In Helensburgh, New South Wales, a registered not-for-profit called Horse Aid runs a program for veterans and first responders suffering from serious mental health challenges. Participants work with re-homed ex-racehorses to learn about communication and emotions and building trust, patience and confidence. I learned about this program when I read a news article about the efficacy of this style of treatment for PTSD experienced by veterans, which had been captured by an Australian filmmaker, Nick Barkla, in his beautiful and hugely impactful documentary *The Healing*. Horse Aid's founder, retired mounted police officer Scott Brodie, pairs traumatised veterans with ex-racehorses in NSW. The approximately 120 to 150 participants a year, who are often not coping, come in small groups for a week at a time and find Scott's alternative therapy of working with horses to be truly transformational and, in the participant's own words in the film, "lifesaving".

In my electorate of Belmont, there are many service men and women who have served our country in war and, having returned home to their lives, are dealing with many mental and physical injuries. The repercussions of their experiences in active service are staggering; divorce, depression, abuse, fear and anxiety occur at some of the highest rates ever seen. Tragically, as I am sure the minister is aware, in Australia, male veterans have a suicide rate 27 per cent higher than that of the general population, and the suicide rate for female veterans is 107 per cent higher than that of the general population.

The US Department of Veterans Affairs Houston branch began referring veterans to equine therapy back in 2022, noting —

“Evidence-based talk psychotherapies for trauma are effective, but we know not every Veteran wants to address their trauma by sitting down in an office or virtual appointment with VA,” ... “Equine-assisted therapy is a great alternative approach that allows Veterans to address their trauma in a hands-on way, alongside other Veterans who understand their story.”

Research published in the *Journal of Clinical Psychiatry* in 2021 showed that equine therapy can jump-start, for want of a better term, the healing process for veterans who suffer from PTSD. Dr Yuval Neria, professor of medical psychology and director of Columbia University's PTSD program, stated —

Both PTSD patients and horses are preoccupied with ongoing concerns about trust and safety. This innovative therapy facilitates bonding, overcoming fear, and re-establishing confidence.

Closer to home, in 2019, RSL LifeCare in Picton, New South Wales, offered equine therapy. Racing NSW supplied off-track horses deemed unsuitable for racing and relatively untrained and unruly—much like many of us in here today! Participants learnt to bond with and train the horses, and while concentrating on the horses' wellbeing and progress, their minds were not wandering into deep and intrusive thoughts. Interestingly, I learnt that the person who runs this program had participated in Horse Aid with Scott Brodie. He was so moved by that experience that he went on to establish his own equine therapy for returned servicemen.

I was recently privileged to meet Jennifer Erwin, a Western Australian veteran of the Royal Australian Navy who served from 2006 to 2016, and hear of her personal experience of equine therapy. Her first experience was a five-day onsite equine therapy program in 2016 with a company based on the east coast. She explained how the program changed her life and said that if she had not experienced it, she doubted that she would still be here today. Jennifer engaged in traditional therapy, and still does, but explained that due to the severity of her trauma, she was unable to be sufficiently present in the moment to benefit from cognitive behaviour therapy until she had undergone equine therapy.

The current focus on treatment of mental health, PTSD and trauma related to service does not include equine-associated therapy and does not deliver the benefits that could immediately help to manage and heal and deal with mental health issues that our service men and women live with each day.

In my electorate of Belmont, I have two racecourses and a stabling precinct. Racing and horses are a part of the fabric of my community.

I ask the minister whether it would be possible for the government to explore equine therapy and programs, similar to Horse Aid, here in WA, whereby ex-racehorses are given a second chance as they work alongside traumatised veterans on the journey towards healing. I thank the minister for taking my grievance.

MR P. PAPALIA (Warnbro — Minister for Veterans Issues) [9.22 am]: I thank the member for her grievance. It is an interesting suggestion and proposal. I also thank her for drawing to my attention the documentary *The Healing*, which is the work of Nick Barkla, and the insight she has given us into the instances in which equine therapy is being employed in Australia for veteran healing.

Taking a moment of reflection, members are probably familiar with Riding for the Disabled. It has had a change of name here in WA to Horse Power, but the organisation still exists around the country. It was established after World War I as a means of treating returned soldiers who were suffering from shell shock, which it was called at that time. It is a long-established principle that equine therapy is a valuable tool in assisting people who suffer from trauma. I recognise and acknowledge that and the opportunity that it represents.

I will update the house on what we have done in the veterans issues portfolio in Western Australia. Since coming to office, our government has increased the funding for the veterans issues portfolio fourfold. Initially, the government contributed \$300 000 a year to the Anzac Day Trust, which then disbursed grants. At the last election, we increased that to \$1.3 million a year.

The Anzac Day Trust is a vehicle through which money is disbursed to efforts in Western Australia to support veterans, noting that veteran support is a federal government responsibility. My predecessor, Hon Peter Tinley, and I have made it a focus of our efforts, noting that we have a relatively small role in it, to assist living veterans and provide additional support when we can to veterans and families in Western Australia. We try to fill gaps where the federal government and Department of Veterans' Affairs are perhaps not as active as we might be.

There is a board for the Anzac Day Trust—volunteers who are great people—and it disburses money to support things like the veterans employment program. It was established in collaboration with the RSL and a company called Working Spirit, which is run by Karyn Hiner, who is a great Western Australian veteran. It places veterans and their families in job opportunities with employers who want to employ veterans across the full spectrum of the economy in Western Australia. Last year, it placed more than 100 Western Australian veterans and family members into jobs. That is a great outcome.

Every year, the Anzac Day Trust funds the operational costs of the Legacy WA Busselton Camp. That is a place where orphans, widows and family members are given an opportunity for respite and camps. We took away from Legacy the cost of having to fundraise to operate that camp. The CEO of Legacy WA, Matt Granger, has been a great partner in that collaboration.

We are establishing the Andrew Russell Veteran's Living Program in Western Australia, which is a collaboration between the RAAF Association and Kylie Russell, to provide accommodation and wraparound services for veterans who are challenged with housing to get themselves back on their feet and back into the community in a self-sustaining fashion. We are also focusing on the prison system, because it has been demonstrated in South Australia that veterans coming out of prison are particularly vulnerable. That is a fantastic partnership. RAAFA's CEO, Michelle Fyfe, is working collaboratively with the Anzac Day Trust and the Western Australian state government to deliver that program.

A psychiatric assistance dog program has been established here in WA. For the first time, veterans will not have to travel to the east coast to be matched with a dog. Kai Zen K9 and the RSLWA have partnered in that with funding from the Anzac Day Trust.

Those are the things that we are doing. We encourage individual providers to partner up with big ex-service organisations that provide administrative support and probity around funding that comes from the taxpayer to deliver programs. I think equine therapy for veterans here in Western Australia is an opportunity for someone to establish a similar program to those I have just outlined—supported by our state government and the Anzac Day Trust. I encourage them to consider coming forward and partnering up with one of the bigger ex-service organisations to support them. If there is an equine therapy provider out there, I encourage it to get involved. I have asked our veterans issues staff in Defence West to explore the field in Western Australia. I know there are equine therapy providers here. We will seek them out and find out whether there is someone interested in establishing a program focused on supporting veterans. It could potentially be a really good contribution. I thank the member—it is a wonderful idea and hopefully we can establish a program that we do not currently have in Western Australia and replicate what has been experienced in New South Wales.