

SYNERGY — HARDSHIP SUPPORT

**373. Ms C.M. ROWE to the Minister for Energy:**

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's commitment to supporting Western Australians facing hardship, particularly as the state recovers from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- (1) Can the minister outline to the house how Synergy is supporting those Western Australians who are doing it tough and helping prevent them from being disconnected?
- (2) Can the minister advise the house whether he is aware of anyone who believes the government should not support struggling Western Australians?

**Mr W.J. JOHNSTON replied:**

- (1)–(2) I am very pleased to answer the question from the member for Belmont. I know her deep commitment to helping people in hardship. I know that is one of the motivations that led her to this place.

Synergy has been prioritising hardship support over the time that the McGowan government has been in power. Last year, we saw a range of COVID supports that helped people in hardship. We saw the \$600 account offset. We also saw the doubling of the energy assistance payment from \$305.25, which meant that the lowest income earners in Western Australia got \$1 210.50 worth of free electricity from the government of Western Australia during 2020. The government has reformed the hardship utility grant scheme program, so that rather than helping Synergy, it helps people in need. We have introduced a household energy efficiency scheme, which is mirrored on a program run by the former Gallop and Carpenter government, but it was abandoned by the Liberal Party when it was in power. We are also implementing the smart energy for social housing program, and that has seen significant bill reductions for people in social housing.

Synergy continues to work hard through the Keeping Connected program, which is in-person outreach to its customers. Synergy is now advertising, inviting customers who are having trouble with their bills to speak directly to it, so rather than the first problem being a bill that customers cannot handle, they are inbound to Synergy to get help from the range of assistance that it can provide. Synergy has been working with financial counsellors and it has created an online portal, which is a really major reform. It allows the financial counsellors to see exactly what is happening with the Synergy billing system. It has led to the Financial Counsellors' Association of Western Australia writing to me to congratulate Synergy on the work it is doing with financial counsellors to help people in hardship. We have seen the government fund additional case managers in Synergy starting in July last year. Seven of the 11 dedicated managers are already on board and we are already seeing excellent results. They have worked with the 1 600 people in most hardship and we have seen 430 of those—over a quarter—already graduate so that they can now support themselves without needing additional assistance. We have also seen Synergy focus on family violence. We know that one of the problems that many people in hardship have is that they are the victims of domestic violence; they have been subject to coercive control and have been left with debts. I am very proud of the work that Synergy is doing there to help people in that terrible situation who are suffering from family violence.

The member asks who is not supporting this action. I was very surprised on Friday to hear that the member for Cottesloe does not support this action. The member for Cottesloe went on radio and said that it was shocking that the Labor government is working with Synergy to do all these things. He said that it was shocking that we are not sending in the debt collectors, that we are not just taking a financial approach to this and that we are actually working with customers to make sure that their life can handle the situation that they are in, because we care for people in that situation. I do not go on radio saying that it is shocking that no debt collectors are being sent out to the people of this state. It is no wonder that that is the attitude of the member for Cottesloe, because the last time the Liberal Party was in government, disconnections went up by 86.2 per cent.