

POVERTY IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Motion

HON SALLY TALBOT (South West) [10.08 am] — without notice: I move —

That in recognition of Anti-Poverty Week 2015, the Parliament commends the work of all the Western Australian groups, schools and organisations that actively participated in the week's activities and calls on the government to acknowledge that poverty and severe hardship affect the lives of too many Western Australians.

I am asking every member in this house to lend their support to the motion that, in recognition of Anti-Poverty Week 2015, the Parliament commends the work of all the Western Australian groups, schools and organisations that actively participated in the week's activities and calls on the government to acknowledge that poverty and severe hardship affect the lives of too many Western Australians. As honourable members would know, Anti-Poverty Week was actually last week, but due to the exigencies of the parliamentary timetable, this is the first opportunity we have to mark Anti-Poverty Week in this place and to pay tribute to those many groups, organisations and individuals who participated in the activities last week. I am sure that it would not be regarded as controversial for me to say that we live in a community in Western Australia that is marked by both its affluence and, in general, its compassion—the way it cares for people who are less advantaged. Having said that, as a community we are still bearing an extraordinarily high level of poverty and disadvantage.

We know how many people in our country live in poverty. We have various markers of poverty, and there is indeed some dispute amongst academics and commentators about how we should be measuring poverty. Should we be talking about some kind of poverty line, some sorts of indicators of deprivation or indicators of social exclusion? There are all sorts of different ideas about the most effective way to quantify poverty in Australia. This is a very interesting point about poverty. It is not straightforward, and I think it is worth devoting a bit of time to understanding what those differences are. I am particularly interested in the quantification of exclusion and disadvantage. In the work of the Brotherhood of St Laurence in devising the social exclusion monitor, we find that it captures disadvantage under seven categories: material resources, employment, education skills, health and disability, social connection, community and personal safety. If we prefer to look at measures of deprivation, the list includes things such as the lack of access to one substantial meal a day, access to medical treatment if required, a decent and secure home, secure locks on doors and windows, home contents insurance, the ability to buy medications prescribed by a doctor, a separate bed for each child, the ability for children to participate in school outings activities, and regular social contact with other people.

Lest that sounds too dry and academic, I explain to honourable members that the point I am making is that we know how to measure poverty. On the Australian Council of Social Service website, there is a remarkably effective little video cartoon that brings all this home to people in a readily understandable way. I recommend that members look at this little two-minute cartoon about how poverty and inequality in Australia can be envisaged. The device used is a swimming pool with five lanes—the five income and wealth categories in Australia. The video shows beautifully that by far the majority of the pool is taken up by the very few people with high incomes and very high levels of wealth. It is a lovely little practical demonstration of the importance of addressing issues such as inequality. The example used in the cartoon is the child from a disadvantaged background who is a very promising swimmer, and walks up to her section of the pool and cannot actually find a place to dive into the pool to show how good she is. That is the extent to which inequality and poverty affect children in our community.

We know how many people live in poverty. A “standard” measure of poverty is people with an income of less than half the national median income. In the category of “severe poverty” are people living on less than 30 per cent of the median income. Australia-wide, those figures translate into 2.5 million to 2.8 million Australians living at a level classified as standard poverty, which includes 800 000 children, and more than 1 million Australians, including 310 000 children, living in severe poverty. As I said, we are an affluent and a compassionate society, yet we are living with this terrible example of disadvantage right in the middle of our society. Our levels are unacceptable compared with Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development averages.

We know who lives in poverty. It is very well established now, apart from the general observation that poverty in the last five decades has become feminised, so that being a woman is in itself a risk factor for living in poverty. It has now been well established that the categories of people who are likely to be affected by poverty and the ill effects of inequality are older people, less educated people, households with no employed members, people living in particular geographic areas—that is, largely people living outside city centres—Indigenous Australians, and Australians with chronic health problems, including people with mental health problems.

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

All that is very well established, so we know how many people live in poverty and who lives in poverty, and we also know what poverty looks like. Just now, when I went through those lists of measures of exclusion and disadvantage, members would have noticed that we are talking about very basic things such as not being able to heat one's home when the temperature falls below about 10 degrees. We are talking about things such as not being able to buy food for the family—the most basic requirement for providing nurture and care to the people we love. As members would have noticed from one of those lists I referred to, we are talking about people who cannot afford dental treatment for themselves or their children. We are most certainly talking about people who have no capacity to make provision for emergencies. When the refrigerator stops working, they have no way of storing food, and when the car blows up they have no way of transporting the children to and from school and other activities. We know what poverty looks like, and we know the ways in which we can measure and quantify that poverty.

We are not dealing here with a simple problem. The point I am leading towards goes right to the heart of the way governments respond to the crisis of poverty, social exclusion, disadvantage and inequality in our community. We are talking about a cycle of disadvantage—a complexity that involves the drivers or causes of poverty being intricately interwoven with the outcomes of poverty. This is not rocket science, but I will explain what I mean in simpler terms. Taking, for example, a measure such as unemployment, a simple fact borne out by every piece of research carried out over the past 10 years is that poverty leads to joblessness, but joblessness leads to poverty. Any individual factor can come along. A person might lose their job, or a company might go into liquidation, but for some reason a person finds themselves without a regular income, which leads to poverty, but the poverty in itself makes it harder to re-enter the jobs market. Unemployment is one of the factors in the cycle of disadvantage. There are of course many others.

I am glad that Hon Col Holt is in the chamber to be part of this debate, and I hope that he might contribute to it later on, because housing is another one of those major factors. Housing is regarded by some agencies as even more crucial than employment. Just as I said that poverty and joblessness is a vicious cycle, so being a renter of housing is an indicator that a person is more likely than a homeowner to fall below those median income levels.

There are more than 100 000 homeless people in Western Australia, 25 per cent of whom are children. Again, there is that cycle of disadvantage in which a driver of poverty is also a driver of the outcome. There is major work to be done by governments to address poverty and inequality through the provision of affordable housing. There is, of course, also educational disadvantage. This is particularly important when considering measures that relate to people's participation in the education system, but it is also very important when looking at early intervention. I do not think there would be any disagreement in this place about the fact that the earlier the problem of poverty can be tackled, the better. Whether it is caused by homelessness, the lack of affordable housing, unemployment, disability or illness, we need to get in there quickly, because the further a person gets into the cycle of disadvantage, the harder it is to pull themselves out. Perhaps it is more aptly described as a spiral of disadvantage, because the further a person gets down the spiral, the harder it is to climb out of it.

I also mentioned the issue of geography, and that is why regional Western Australia ought to be right at the front and centre of our plans—our policy making, our regulation and all our activities as legislators—for providing secure local jobs and affordable housing where people want to live and where people want to work. The Minister for Housing, Hon Col Holt, would know about a study I often refer to in this place in this context about the local economy in Margaret River. The economy in Margaret River is cyclical and there is always a tendency for property prices to force out local workers, so the people who provide labour for the service industries such as tourism and hospitality are exactly those who cannot afford to live in Margaret River. They therefore have to live a long, long way away and their transport costs, because of the lack of public transport in an area such as that, put them well and truly into that cycle of deprivation. There are very practical measures that can be taken to look at how poverty and inequality are related to the geographical spread of the population in Western Australia.

Of course, there is also the massive and abiding question of Aboriginal poverty and disadvantage. I know other members on this side of the chamber will want to address this matter in more detail than I have time to do now in my opening comments, but I just draw the attention of the house to the fact that before we even begin to talk about any other kind of social inclusion, disadvantage or deprivation, salaries for Aboriginal people who are in employment are 20 per cent lower—Aboriginal people earn on average 20 per cent less than non-Aboriginal people in our state. That is a shocking place to start the race towards any kind of eradication of poverty or ending of inequality.

My point here is that a sure recipe for disaster when we look at an issue such as poverty and inequality is to bring that siloed government mentality to addressing the problem. Although I have just named six or seven factors that relate to portfolios held by six or seven different ministers, obviously, the Minister for Housing has to work with the Minister for Health and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs if we are ever going to make the kinds of changes that will begin to address these inequalities in our community. This is something I have spoken about many

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

times, and it is something the government always talks big about, but delivers small on. Every minister taking over a new portfolio will talk about the fact that they will be the ones to end siloed government thinking, yet what we see now, years and years into a Liberal–National government, are the same practices continuing— Education does not talk to Health or Aboriginal Affairs does not talk to Housing. This is happening over and over again, and I say to government again that if there is the impression sitting around the cabinet table that something is happening and changes are taking place, I can say that they are not happening on the ground. Day after day as I move around my electorate in the south west, I hear stories about how that siloed government approach is still very persuasive down at the grassroots level.

I want to make a couple of comments about what happened in the south west last week as part of Anti-Poverty Week. I will just mention three projects, which is all that time allows me. Anglicare is one of the major drivers of the Anti-Poverty Week initiative and it put on a number of events, including community events for people to understand a bit more about how poverty affects their community. There was a very well attended event in Mandurah to which people came along, had a sausage in a bun and watched a number of presentations about poverty in the Mandurah area. Mandurah, of course, is still marked by a report from about 10 years ago referred to as “A Tale of Two Cities”, because although there is some remarkable affluence in Mandurah, there is also a distressing level of poverty. The City of Albany was also extremely active and I was very impressed by the couches4poverty project. The city donated couches that were decorated with messages about what it is like to be a homeless person, to live in poverty, to feel excluded and to be in that tiny sliver of the swimming pool that is so intensely overcrowded. I have a photo of one of the couches, Mr President; it took me a while to find this, so I thought I would do honourable members a bit of a service by tabling it at the end of my comments. I understand that project was extremely well supported and I think the City of Albany, and particularly Tammy Flett, who put the project together, deserve our congratulations and thanks. Albany Public Library also put on a series of TED talks and discussions, which I understand were very much appreciated by the Albany community.

There are signs of hope. There are a number of really remarkably informative and productive reports that are available to honourable members if they care to look them up. I will just mention three of them. There is the Australian Council of Social Service “Inequality in Australia” report of 2015, which I think every member should have sitting on their desk to use as a reference whenever anything to do with health, education, housing et cetera is talked about in this place. There is also the St Vincent de Paul report titled “Sick with worry...”, which gives a number of anecdotes, with people giving their personal stories, and some of them are heartbreaking. There is also the report from the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, which is my personal favourite. That is the report from which I have been quoting some of the facts and figures I have shared with honourable members. The report is called “Addressing entrenched disadvantage in Australia: April 2015”. As I said, there are signs of hope. The St Vincent de Paul report titled “Sick with worry...” refers to three remarkable opportunities for change. The first is that the community by and large benefits from and supports the establishment of rights-based services. Hon Helen Morton, as Minister for Mental Health, will know all about rights-based services because of the recovery model beginning to appear in mental health. We should be looking at that kind of model right across service provision in our state. The report also mentions people’s love for their children, which I think is a good note to end on. We hear horrible stories, but by and large, people will starve for their children. They should not have to do that in Western Australia in 2015. The final point the report makes is that what everyone wants is to be able to participate. That is what we saw in Anti-Poverty Week last week: participation, owning the issue, understanding the problem and talking about the problem in local communities. That is what puts us right on the front foot in making sure our community is a better place to live.

The PRESIDENT: I believe Hon Sally Talbot tabled a document she referred to during her remarks.

Leave granted [See paper 3554.]

HON ALANNA CLOHESY (East Metropolitan) [10.29 am]: I thank Hon Sally Talbot for bringing this important motion to the house to recognise Anti-Poverty Week. I not only commend the work of groups, schools and other organisations in Western Australia last week to recognise Anti-Poverty Week, but also acknowledge that poverty and severe hardship affect the lives of many people in Western Australia.

Anti-Poverty Week is a really important week for recognising that poverty exists within our society and for strengthening our understanding about the causes of poverty and the consequences and hardship that people experience as a result of living in poverty. I thank all those groups that participated in that important week.

In the East Metropolitan Region the Rise community support network held a morning tea to recognise Anti-Poverty Week and, of course, the Rise network is a very important service provider for a range of people living in poverty and people who are vulnerable in our society. The group provides support for young people,

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

aged-care services, care and support for people with disability, support for carers, and mental health services. All those groups of people are well and truly overrepresented in measures of poverty.

Other organisations that I wish to thank for their participation in this important week include Foodbank Western Australia, The Salvation Army, Anglicare WA, The Big Issue organisation; the Western Australian Council of Social Service and the University of Western Australian Business School Centre for Social Impact—both these organisations provide us with important information and understanding about poverty and the impact of poverty; the Smith family, St Vincent de Paul, the Committee for Economic Development of Australia, and many other organisations. If I have left any out, I apologise; it just goes to show the breadth of Anti-Poverty Week and its importance.

One of the reasons we need a week such as this to understand poverty and the impact of poverty is that as a visual-based society, all too often we see on our television images of poverty as those of war, famine and refugees escaping violence in their home countries and we assume that is the sum total of poverty. That is probably because we are so frequently bombarded with those images of famine and war, and perhaps that is what feeds our understanding of what poverty is. They are heart-wrenching images and they make us think about poverty and what causes poverty, and in some cases motivates us to act to address some of those issues, and that is important. Rarely do we see images of poverty of everyday people in Western Australia, where the impact is just as difficult and just as hard for people. Poverty is as real in Western Australia as it is in other countries in the world. It is difficult for us to conceive of poverty and hardship when we live in a supposedly affluent state such as Western Australia, but the facts tell us something very different. The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre report is a very important report about poverty and disadvantage in Australia. It is titled “Falling through the Cracks” and I recommend this report to members. The report tells us that 4.7 per cent of the Western Australian population currently live in severe poverty. As Hon Sally Talbot tells us, severe poverty is one measure on a continuum of measures of poverty. The spectrum ranges from moderate, to standard, to substantial and through to severe. That 4.7 per cent of our population in Western Australia, or about 107 000 people, are at the very top end of the scale of measures of poverty in Western Australia. “Severe” means that that group of people live on less than 30 per cent of the national median income.

That report does not go into detail about lived experience of poverty and what those people experience on a day-to-day level, but the reality is that people living in poverty, whether it is moderate, standard, substantial or severe, experience extreme hardship. We have heard from Hon Sally Talbot that housing is one of those pressure points for people living in poverty. For many people, it is as basic as not having enough food to eat, not having enough money to buy food and having that occur day in, day out. Many of those people are homeless, and Western Australia has a significant rate of homelessness, and then there are the other additional costs of living. Poverty does not just mean being poor; poverty means a whole lot of other things, including lack of access to housing and food and lack of access to other activities of daily living. It means being excluded from the community.

Many groups experience poverty at different levels, for different reasons and in different ways. People with disability are overrepresented in rates of poverty, particularly in Western Australia. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development reports that people with disability have a greater risk of poverty—1.6 times higher than people without disability. Nearly one in two people with disability live in or near poverty in Western Australia—that is 45 per cent of all people with disability. That rate of relative poverty is more than double the OECD average; it is more than double in an affluent country such as Australia. Australia comes twenty-seventh out of 27—last of the OECD countries—with a relative poverty rate of 2.7 per cent or less. Given that people with disability comprise 20 per cent of the Australian population, that is a significant and unacceptable level. People with disability experience exclusion from our society in a number of ways. People with disability who are without access to education and employment are more likely to experience greater levels of poverty than other people with disability.

The “Falling through the Cracks” report, which I referred to earlier, refers to the degree of disability that a person experiences combined with other forms of exclusion to make it more likely for people with disability to be living in greater rates of poverty. For example, non-elderly, couple-only households, where people are living as a couple but are not elderly and where there is a mild to moderate activity limitation or disability, or education or employment limitation, are more than twice as likely to be in poverty as non-elderly couples without a disability. That pattern of poverty exists across all groups.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme was developed to address this exclusion, and although the trials are still continuing, it is important to recognise that the real role and importance of any support mechanism, including the NDIS, is to ensure that people with disability are no longer excluded from society, education or employment, and, in particular, to help raise people with disability out of living in poverty.

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

HON SAMANTHA ROWE (East Metropolitan) [10.39 am]: I would like to start by thanking Hon Sally Talbot for bringing this motion to the house today. It is important that we acknowledge the great work done by WA organisations, schools and groups for Anti-Poverty Week, and that we also highlight poverty not just here in Australia, but also overseas. In my contribution this morning, I would like to talk about inequality. When I became a member of this place, I talked about poverty and inequality in my inaugural speech. When we talk about poverty, it is important to have an understanding that it is not necessarily a political issue; it is an issue that we all as a community in WA need to get behind and address as a matter of urgency. Poverty is an injustice that no-one aspires to. No-one chooses to live in poverty or without the basic necessities of life. Poverty is not a lifestyle choice.

To highlight some of these comments about inequality, I would like to share with the house a speech by Peter O’Keefe that I read recently. Peter is the secretary of the Shop, Distributive and Allied Employees Association of WA. The speech was given on 19 October this year and was reconstructed on the website workinglife.org.au. Unfortunately, I do not have time to read the entire document, although I think the house would find it very insightful on inequality that we are facing here in WA and overseas. However, I will try to share as much as I can in the limited time I have. It states —

Here in Australia, there is a determined attempt by those on the extreme right to characterise any attempt to address income inequality as “the politics of envy”, or more commonly, “class warfare”.

For those who haven’t hear Warren Buffet’s take on class warfare, it is worth recounting.

Buffet says:

There’s a class war alright. But it’s my class the rich class, that is making war, and we are winning.

I was speaking to my 18 year old son about politics some weeks ago—when Joe Hockey was still Treasurer. And I said to him, there is a formula that the right trot out, albeit in varying garb, with monotonous regularity as a means of fixing economic problems:

Tax cuts for the rich, wage cuts for the poor.

And I said to him—look what we have now. We have Joe Hockey calling for tax relief at the top end, while the business community is trying to reduce weekend penalty rates for low paid workers in retail and hospitality and the Commission of Audit calls for a reduction in the minimum wage. Tax cuts for the rich, wage cuts for the poor. Tax cuts to stimulate investment and start the trickle down process, wage cuts to boost employment.

In 2010 Cambridge Economics Professor Ha Joon Chang wrote a book entitled “23 things they don’t tell you about capitalism”. In it, he savages the notion of trickle down economics—the idea that only by allowing the rich the freedom to get richer (usually via tax cuts) will a bigger pie be created and thus able to be shared amongst us all. Professor Chang notes that since 1980:

We have given the rich a bigger slice of our pie in the belief that they would create more wealth. The rich got the bigger slice of the pie all right, but they have actually reduced the pace at which the pie is growing—in comparison to the 1950–1970s period.

And yet we seem to be inexorably stuck on this path, with only a few muffled voices calling out in opposition. Where does this attitude of indifference to the outcomes of our economic system get us? I think it takes us backwards. Post world war two, countries such as the US and Australia enjoyed a golden age of the middle class. Chrystia Freeland notes this period as being referred to in the US as the “Treaty of Detroit”, characterised by strong unions, a high minimum wage, and high taxes. A time when the gap between the 1% and everyone else fell rapidly. Andrew Leigh in his book *Battlers and Billionaires* notes the same trend in Australia—he calls it the Great Compression—again, strong unions, high wages, a large middle class and shrinking income inequality. Ha Joon Chang refers to the period as the “Golden era of Capitalism”—a time when our system provided the greatest benefit to the greatest number.

That equalisation of society began with the growth and success of the trade union movement and consequently the middle class, and is ending with the decline of both institutions.

It goes on —

The increasing casualization of jobs, the de-unionisation of the workforce, attacks on penalty rates and wages will have an inevitable effect. Indeed, they already have. Some time ago I ran a competition in our magazine: Penalty Rates are Important Because: ____.

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

We got hundreds of entries, and it was difficult to choose winners. In the end, I expanded the prize list from 3 to 5 because I could not separate them. Some entries spoke about their dignity as members of society and the fact that penalty rates recognised the sacrifices they and their families made. But many just spoke of the need to survive. Single mums, particularly. One entry gave an insight into what our fellow Australians in 2015 can experience. It read:

“Penalty Rates are important because since losing my husband 12 months ago every cent I earn is required to survive—just to pay the bills and to live.”

...

AC Grayling writes in “The Meaning of Things” about first and third world poverty. He says:

Third and First world poverty are entirely different in character because of the great difference in their historical and economic settings.

Third world poverty is life on the margins of existence, a tough and unforgiving struggle, dedicated to the present moment and having room in it for only two feelings: despair and hope.

First world poverty is a relative matter, but no less painful for being so. In developed societies possession of the amenities of life, which includes not just objects like houses and cars, but also powers, like being able to go out to the cinema or a restaurant and to take holidays, is equivalent to status, to full membership of the community, to having a place and a voice. Without these things one is less than half a citizen, disempowered and sidelined.

It goes on —

... not everyone gets to be an Astronaut, or a CEO, or a Lawyer, when they grow up. And society could not possibly function if they did. Someone needs to stack the shelves at our supermarkets. Someone needs to load the trucks at distribution centres. Someone needs to be there to serve customers who need assistance. The fact that people are in these positions does not mean they are less deserving. They are not, as the Productivity Commission would have us believe, second class citizens. They have families, aspirations and inherent dignity as human beings that must be recognised and respected.

Those who are successful in our society often do work hard, but they often benefit from luck, and they always benefit from the structures and institutions that society has put in place, and keeps in place as part of our social compact. To maintain that compact, we can not continue to let the lower paid fall further behind. To fall, along with their families and children, into a poverty trap. As AC Grayling notes:

Poverty is not a virus, a natural disaster, or an accident. It is man-made.

And so, in being man made, it is surely something we can address. To undo the damage that has been done, and to set our society on a course towards shared prosperity, rather than an awful divide between rich and poor.

...

To the politicians and to those representatives of companies, I commend to you the thought experiment popularised by John Rawls—that of the veil of ignorance. If you get to make the rules, make them as if you had no idea where you personally sit in the scheme of things, such that a rule that punishes the poor, or the elderly, might just punish you.

And for all of us, indifference is not a strategy for success. We should become informed, become involved and take a stand. Question motives, question those who thrust economic dogma upon us, and help to make sure we are a society that puts a premium on fairness and on compassion. After all, in the end, we are all in this together.

I just wanted to share that with the house because I thought it was a very insightful speech given by Peter O’Keefe and pertinent, given that we are talking about Anti-Poverty Week.

HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan — Minister for Mental Health) [10.49 am]: I would also like to commend the work of all the WA groups, schools and organisations that participated in the Anti-Poverty Week 2015 activities, and I acknowledge that poverty and severe hardship affects the lives of too many Western Australians. A particular organisation that I want to spend a little time talking about today is the Salvation Army. I would particularly like to pay tribute to Kris Halliday, who has subsequently left the Salvation Army in Perth and has gone to work in Darwin. About two or three Fridays ago, I went out with Kris on his Friday night support role in the community, where he takes food and support to people who are homeless. I went with the member for Perth, Eleni Evangel. It was a particularly rainy night. Of course, as

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

members could expect, most of the people whom the Salvation Army had in the particular area that it covered were people they knew, mostly by name. The evening started off with going to the Salvation Army kitchen, where a lot of the food had been sourced from Foodbank, and getting the food into sizeable packages that could be taken to people. We came across about 25 people that night. What was amazing was that Kris knew almost exactly where they would be and knew them by name, and he had a bit of background information about these people as well. He did explain to us that these people are fairly transient as well.

I will give members an understanding of some of the people we met up with that evening. There was a couple from Perth who had been to Broome for the winter months and had just arrived back in Perth. They were actually quite resourceful people and were not seeking any assistance in the way of accommodation or crisis accommodation. From the brief interaction we had with them, they did not want to accept anything that was being offered to them other than the food and hot drinks that were being provided that night. There is no doubt that the gentleman of that couple was a person with a disability, so there was also an inquiry as to whether he would have liked to have been connected with the Disability Services Commission, which he also declined. There was an individual in Wellington Square with a severe alcohol problem. It was just horrendous to see the situation that that gentleman was in. We did manage to encourage him. Three of us helped him to get into the van, because he was totally unable to get there by himself, and we took him to a sobering-up centre that night, hoping that he would make use of the facilities and services there and would then perhaps go on to undertake a withdrawal program with the Salvation Army in Highgate.

One of the surprising situations we came across—surprising for me—was that of a Polish man who was over 65 and who had been staying in the one spot in East Perth for over two years. He had been sleeping on the overhang step area of a structure there. As he put it, he had amazing sights across the city. He considered that he was in a pretty good spot; that was the way he talked about it. He was incredibly well resourced, again, with all the equipment that he needed and he was not interested in any of the assistance that was being offered. I understand from a conversation Kris had with me about this gentleman that he had been in a relationship and living in his own home, but that something had occurred and he had left the home and had been living in this place for around two years. When other people come to that place, he tends to move away for a short period, especially if any violence or alcohol is involved, because he is certainly not a disruptive person. When they move on, he comes back to that spot.

There was a lady who we were able to take to an overnight crisis centre that night. Unfortunately, the gentleman who was with her had been drinking and therefore was not able to access that crisis facility. He would have been able to go to the sobering-up centre but he did not want that; he preferred to stay in the place where he was and then meet up with his partner at the crisis centre the next morning when he had sobered up a bit. We took another lady to a sobering-up centre. She was in a group of about five people and there was a lot of violence and aggression taking place at that particular location. It was near Wellington Street, but because it was raining, people were on the verandah area of the Department of Education building. It was actually quite difficult in that situation, but Kris knew exactly what to do. I would not have moved into that scene without him being there. He very quickly got the lady in question into the van, drove off et cetera and allowed the remaining people to stay there. This lady was able to go into the sobering-up centre overnight as well. I cannot remember whether she was from Fitzroy Crossing or Halls Creek, but she was from an area a reasonable way away from Perth and really did not have connections in Perth other than this group she was with.

By far the most disturbing situation was what I observed on the overhang verandah area at Langley Park. There are some change rooms down there. On this particular night there were probably three groups of people who were staying in that section of the park. I must say that in most of these cases these people were very well educated. When I say that they were very well educated, I mean that we were having great conversations with them, which gave me the impression that they had seen quite a lot of life and had had interesting lives. I was engaged in a conversation like that with somebody when Kris came up and asked me to come and have a look at a girl and to tell him how old I thought she was. I went with him to another group, still in the overhang area of the Langley Park change rooms, and there was a young girl there who I anticipated was probably somewhere between the ages of 16 and 19. She was with three older men and she was completely out cold. There was no way that we could rouse her at all. The most disturbing part of that was that it was then indicated to me, and I was able to observe, that she was lying on cement with a blanket under her but she was wearing only a T-shirt. Of course, I felt a great level of concern about this situation. I just did not believe that we could leave that situation like that and not do anything about it. That was precisely the feeling that Kris had as well. We did call the ambulance and the police to that particular situation and waited until they had arrived. As Kris Halliday said, he is not in a situation in which he can be judgemental or do anything other than just alert the appropriate authorities to come to a situation like that and make their own investigation. We waited while this young girl was taken away in the ambulance and then left. I obviously will always wonder what the circumstances were around

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

that particular incident, because at no stage does the Salvation Army have the opportunity to follow up or find out that sort of information.

Once again, it was an eye-opening experience for me to be out with the Salvation Army and to see the non-judgemental support work that they do for all these people. I am sure that somebody new has come to replace Kris Halliday and has taken over the work that he has been doing. He was a one-man band that night with me and Eleni Evangel. I do not know, if we were not there, who he would have had supporting him, but he had a set space within the city that he covered a few nights a week, and Friday night was the night that we were with him.

It reminded me again—I think I am concurring with the comments that have been made already—that it needs a whole-of-community approach. On its own, government cannot solve these sorts of problems and cannot prevent them. There is a whole host of non-government organisations involved in supporting people who are experiencing severe poverty or who are in homelessness situations and there is no doubt that it affects the lives of too many Western Australians. I do not believe that we have a figure that states that this much would be okay or that anything above this line is too many. Having even one person who is in the situation that I have described is one too many.

I am reminded again about the fact that the causes of poverty are many, but they are largely attributed to unemployment or having a low-paying job. As I said, some of the people I met that night were not people who would be unemployable by any chance; they were certainly people who could be employed. The causes, of course, are low levels of education or literacy and it can be exacerbated by disability or having an illness or an addiction, all of which we saw that night. Despite the comments made by Hon Sally Talbot that there is no coordination between government agencies or that no collaboration is taking place, that is not the case. There is a lot of that work taking place. I will give members one example. More than 50 per cent of homelessness problems and poverty comes from family and domestic violence. We have this amazing situation now in which family and domestic violence employees from the Department for Child Protection and Family Support work with the police and non-government organisations in a co-located facility in all 17 separate police districts across the state. There are government agencies that work together and I could not let the comment go without making some comments about the fact that that is not necessarily so. It might not always be the case; there are times when we like to report on the cases that do not go well, but we do not get to hear or talk about the times that collaboration, coordination and integration work extremely well.

A lot more work needs to be done in prevention and early intervention so that people do not fall into these situations, and a fair bit of that work is taking place again already. The example that I would give is the DropIN online community services hub. The state government has provided funding to the Western Australian Council of Social Service for the DropIN hub, which supports better collaboration and sharing of ideas. I have mentioned Foodbank, but that is another organisation that will receive over \$6 million this year for new warehouse facilities so that it can carry out its effective work in providing low-cost food to vulnerable individuals and struggling families. I would just also like to comment on some of the other areas that were mentioned around homelessness and the impact it has on people with disability and the implementation of the National Disability Insurance Scheme. Also, the recovery program that is taking place in mental health and the Transitional Housing and Support Program houses, which probably are not heard about as much. They are transitional housing for people with drug and alcohol problems who are coming out of rehabilitation programs. There are about 14 THASP houses now operating in the state. That program provides for people recovering from drug and alcohol rehab to transition back into alternative housing before they go back into the community.

HON SUE ELLERY (South Metropolitan — Leader of the Opposition) [11.04 am]: I thank Hon Sally Talbot for moving this motion today. I add my recognition of and support for all those organisations that used Anti-Poverty Week 2015, which was last week, to focus on the issue of poverty and to draw attention to the work that their respective agencies undertake. Over my time as a representative for the South Metropolitan Region, I have been pleased to have regular, ongoing support for and a relationship with St Patrick's Community Support Centre and Wesley Mission, both in Fremantle; Riverton Baptist Community Church; and Foodbank. I have done what little I could to assist them.

The state government has levers that it can pull deliberately and methodically to alleviate the impacts of poverty and indeed to lift people out of poverty. Housing is critical to those levers. It is the case that this government can do more. I particularly want to focus on the work that Anglicare Australia does every year and its snapshot of affordable housing. In April each year, Anglicare Australia does a snapshot of rental housing across Australia and then it releases state by state the results of that to demonstrate the extent to which people on respective government benefits and people on low incomes can find housing within their income. This year, the media release that Anglicare Australia issued on 30 April states —

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

Chronic housing stress: out of control

“The proof is in the pudding, and our Rental Affordability Snapshot figures this year show there is a severe housing crisis for people on low incomes. As a matter of urgency, governments must put a national plan in place to resolve it,” Anglicare Australia Executive Director, Kasy Chambers said today.

Members may think that they know the name Kasy Chambers from somewhere else. This Kasy Chambers, I am sure, has a great voice but it is not the same Kasey Chambers! She gets pretty sick of people making the connection. Nevertheless, the media release goes on to state —

“The terrible shortage of affordable housing affects everyone trying to make do on a low income, whatever their circumstance,” Ms Chambers said.

...

... Over the weekend of 11 April, we —

That is Anglicare —

surveyed more than 65,600 properties and found just 618 properties across the country were suitable for a couple on Newstart with two children. A single person on Parenting Payment with two children had just 165 options.

“Less than 2% of the properties were affordable for people with disability. There were only 8 rooms or dwellings that a young person on Youth Allowance could afford, and we found only 10 properties suitable for someone living alone and looking for work.

“Although people on Age Pension fared slightly better than other household types, many older private renters are at risk of homelessness for the first time in their life.

I have people in my family who are one pay cheque or one pension payment away from not being able to meet their housing costs. The media release continues —

Social housing is especially important for older people as the long term tenure, as well as low rent, allows them to maintain independence and connection, but it is in short supply.

It goes on to state —

“What we want is a national plan for affordable housing supported by all levels of government, which means serious commitment to investment and infrastructure, guided by the social welfare sector and industry. Key elements of this include: improved housing utility; tax reform; more social housing; adequate income for those on low income; and real collaboration across the sector.”

I am sure the examples that the minister just gave us about collaboration between agencies is the case. I am sure it does exist, but by no stretch of the imagination could anyone stand in this chamber and say that the silo effect has been abolished or that agencies cannot do better to work together. That is the point that Kasy was making in that Anglicare media release.

For Western Australia, the Anglicare “Rental Affordability Snapshot” states —

Affordable rental was defined as 30% or less of a family or individual’s gross income. This is a commonly used indicator of housing stress for low income households.

It goes on to state that in WA, data was collected on 9 803 private rental listings found on realestate.com.au. This number is up—that is a good thing—by 41 per cent from the 6 975 private rental listings in April 2014, and is up significantly more, by 129 per cent, on the figure for April 2013.

The Anglicare report groups these figures into three locations: greater metropolitan Perth, which includes Mandurah; south west and great southern, which includes Bunbury and Albany; and north west, which includes Pilbara and the Kimberley. In greater metropolitan Perth, the median rental was \$430 a week. This is still down 10 per cent from \$480 in April 2014. That is good. However, regardless of the decrease in the median price of rental properties, they are still not affordable for a person who is on government benefits—that is, zero properties were available for people on government benefits—and there was limited availability for low-income earners. Fewer than 25 per cent of the properties that were available for rent that weekend were affordable for people who are in the workforce and earning an income. Low-income earners, both singles and couples, were definitely better off than those who were relying on government benefits. The best case scenario for low-income earners in Perth was to be in a couple in which both adults are earning the minimum wage. In Perth, there were 1 666 affordable and appropriate properties available for couples with two children on the minimum wage, making up 21 per cent of available listings. If anyone thinks there is no connection between the debate on penalty rates, as set out by my

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

colleague Hon Samantha Rowe, and people's capacity to pay their rent, they need to think again, because there is a direct connection. Single minimum wage earners with two children do not fare as well, with only 10 properties available. Single minimum wage earners without children were in the same position, with only 10 properties available. A couple in which one adult is on the minimum wage, and which receives the partnered parenting payment and family tax benefit A and B, was slightly better off, with 0.9 per cent of listed properties available. That is what was affordable in the rental market at the time of that snapshot.

In the public housing market, if we take the figures in the Department of Housing annual report 2014–15, some 20 127 customer types—that is not actually individuals—are on the waitlist. The waitlist has blown out. I note that the Minister for Housing will get up and speak soon, and I am sure the minister will tell us, but my understanding is that the waitlist for non-urgent housing is still around two years, or maybe just a bit over two years. What are people supposed to do in that two-year intervening period? As I said, I have family members who are one pay cheque away from being in a position in which they would be looking to get on the waitlist, and then they will be waiting for two years. Those family members would be supported by me and other members of my family to make sure that they were not the kind of people who the minister bumped into on that night just a few weeks ago. However, that is not the case for all of the 20 127 customer types who are on the waitlist. The Department of Housing defines “customer types” as families, senior singles, senior couples, and singles. That is an enormous number of people.

The point I made at the start of my commentary is that although income public policy is driven by the federal government, and the levers are pulled and pushed by the federal government, it is not the case that state governments cannot do anything about this. They can do more, and they must do more, to address what Anglicare Australia has described as “chronic housing stress: out of control” as a result of its examination of the private rental market.

I had hoped that I would have time to canvass the increases in utility costs under this government. I will not have the time to go through all those increases, except to say they are huge. The charges for electricity, water, sewerage and drainage have gone up under this government by 72.53 per cent. If people think that penalty rates have nothing to do with people's capacity to pay their utility bills, they are wrong and they need to think again.

HON COL HOLT (South West — Minister for Housing) [11.14 am]: I want to make a few comments on this motion. The government obviously recognises the role that housing plays in people's lives. If we look at Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which I have talked about in this house before, one of the basic building blocks of people's lives is shelter—a place to call home, have a roof over their heads and have a stable environment so that they can get a job and feed their family and go to training and education. Housing is a fundamental need, and that is well recognised.

Interestingly, I was at a breakfast just this morning that was about affordable housing. The breakfast was hosted jointly by Shelter WA, the new chair of which is Mark Glasson from Anglicare, and the Property Council of Western Australia. That was an interesting mix, I thought, and I think I commented at the time that they are a bit like Felix Unger and Oscar Madison in *The Odd Couple*. We would think at first glance that they would come from different sides of the spectrum in terms of housing. However, in fact they recognise that they need to work together to address the affordable housing challenge that exists in Western Australia and across Australia. That challenge is not new; it has been the case for a number of years. There was even more of a challenge when Western Australia was a boom state and 1 500 people were coming into this state every week. That put a great deal of pressure on all our essential services. It particularly put a great deal of pressure on house prices and rental costs and drove them up. Luckily, we have had a bit of a reprieve in the last six to eight months, because the influx of people is slowing, and in fact is sometimes going in the opposite way, and rental prices and the median house price have come down. However, housing costs and rental prices have not come down far enough to meet all the needs of our community, as Hon Sue Ellery has mentioned. This breakfast was about those two groups coming together with government, through my representation, and the Housing Authority, to try to tackle the issue of affordable housing from a broad spectrum and industry view. That is the only way in which we will be able to tackle this issue.

It is interesting that Western Australia is the only state that has an affordable housing strategy. That strategy was started in 2010. People would know that the 20 000 affordable homes that were due to be delivered under that strategy have been delivered five years ahead of schedule, and we have set a figures of another 10 000 affordable homes by 2020. We pulled a lot of levers to make the first 20 000 happen, and I think it will be a big challenge to deliver on the next 10 000, and we will need to pull a few more levers, which is why we need to have partnerships across both industry and the community to deliver those things.

I also caught up on the data around what Kasy Chambers from Anglicare has been saying, and I think I heard that said on radio as well. I am glad that Anglicare has put a bit of a focus on Western Australia, and I am glad it

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

has said that we need to have a strategy that goes across all levels of government. Until recently, I was not sure that the federal government knew about the challenges in the affordable housing space, especially in Western Australia, and what we were going through. It is good that the federal government is now making some conversation about that, although it is probably driven more by what has happened on the east coast, which has raised its awareness about this issue. I know that the former Treasurer, Joe Hockey, talked about it, in probably some unfortunate language. We need all levels of government to be involved in addressing the affordable housing challenge in this state. Although we can pull some levers at the state level, and industry needs to get involved to see what it can do, the federal government definitely needs to play a role in pulling the levers in terms of the strategies that it can help with.

I have talked in this house previously about the housing continuum, which goes from providing emergency accommodation for those who are homeless all the way through to home ownership. This government is approaching that by trying to address many of the parts along that continuum, from providing emergency accommodation at places like 100 Hampton Road and The Foyer project all the way through to home ownership where people can go to the bank and get a loan and move into their own home. There are a lot of different parts to that continuum. That includes the role that social housing can play, and the role that can be played by things such as shared equity loans, through which the government partners with people so that they can have home ownership, and Keystart and the provision of low-doc loans for people who cannot go to the bank and get a loan. We need to tackle all of that.

One of the things that I have realised since I have been in this role is that quite a lot of people in a social housing situation have not really thought about aspiring to homeownership. Some of them have thought about it but cannot get there for a variety of reasons, including disability, a lack of adequate training or not being able to get a job, but I know that others probably have not thought about it because they just did not think they could aspire to it. We need to change that conversation and that language so that those people realise they can aspire to homeownership. We are starting to change those conversations in the East Kimberley, and the East Kimberley transitional housing program is a great example of that. Aboriginal people living in social housing who have a job but do not qualify because of their income level are being provided with other housing and wraparound services to help them manage their budget, apply to the bank, or even Keystart, for a loan and move out of the social housing situation and into homeownership either on their own or through a shared equity loan. That is an investment in helping those people to move along that continuum, and that is what we will continue to do.

As I have said, we have to tackle that at all levels of the spectrum, and that includes the commitment by the state government of \$560 million towards the social housing investment program, which will deliver about another thousand houses into the social housing inventory to help house families and seniors on the priority waiting list. We are tackling it in that way. I think we have some runs on the board in the affordable housing strategy. We need to keep working on that. Partnerships will continue to be important. In about two weeks, the affordable housing conference will occur in Fremantle. Western Australia is hosting it for the first time in about four or five years. A number of people will come from the eastern states and some will come from New Zealand. That is a great opportunity for us to showcase what we have done as the only state with an affordable housing strategy; maybe they can learn about some of the stuff that we have. Other states do not have a Keystart lender as we do, so they have some challenges in trying to move people along that continuum. I look forward to interacting in the future with my federal counterparts and seeing what they can do to help deliver outcomes in Western Australia.

I want to touch on a couple of other things before I sit down. Foodbank of Western Australia and Anti-Poverty Week were mentioned. In the past two days, Hon Paul Brown and I did our annual Foodbank Lamb Legends food drive at Muchea and Katanning. Last year, about 480 lambs were donated through the sales, which were turned into more than 75 000 meals in the Foodbank system. Often it has the challenge of providing protein. I am not sure of the figures this time, but I suggest that they were above that.

Hon Paul Brown: It was just shy of 500.

Hon COL HOLT: Just shy of 500 lambs were donated. I know that the member made me buy a pen of 11 to go into the Foodbank system. If any members of Parliament want to donate a pen of sheep next year to show their support for Foodbank, I am sure that I can put in a good bid for them at Muchea or Katanning. It is a very practical way of doing it. Those lambs were turned into about 80 000 or 85 000 meals. The generosity of the agricultural industry, including processors, vendors and buyers, makes a great contribution to Foodbank, a very worthwhile charity. I have to single out Fletcher International Exports, the processor in Albany. I rang the guy and said, "Mate, I'm sorry but we're going to send some sheep your way for processing." He said, "I wish you'd told me earlier" and I said, "About 300 or 400 of them are going to land at your place sometime this afternoon." He said, "No worries, mate; we'll handle it and get it into the Foodbank system within the next day." That shows the generosity and commitment of the agricultural industry to something such as Foodbank.

Hon Dr Sally Talbot; Hon Alanna Clohesy; Hon Samantha Rowe; Hon Helen Morton; Hon Sue Ellery; Hon Col Holt; Hon Stephen Dawson

I have some comments about Margaret River, which Hon Sally Talbot talked about. Margaret River very definitely has a two-paced local economy. Although there are multimillion-dollar homes, people are also living in their cars, in parks and on driveways, and somehow we need to address that. Perhaps when we talk about central worker accommodation, we could look at what we have done in other parts of the state, especially the Pilbara.

HON STEPHEN DAWSON (Mining and Pastoral) [11.24 am]: I will not take a long time, given that the Minister for Education wants to speak. I, too, congratulate Hon Sally Talbot for bringing this motion to the house this morning. Unfortunately, I cannot report on any activities that took place in my electorate during Anti-Poverty Week, because, after looking at the list, I note that none did. However, I give the honourable member a guarantee that I will certainly work with some of the non-government organisations in my electorate to make sure that they participate in this week next year.

Jesuit Social Services and Catholic Social Services Australia commissioned some research into place-based disadvantage across the nation. It did this research first in 2007 and it recently updated the figures in 2015. I was very interested to see that, not surprisingly, the most disadvantaged local government authorities in Western Australia are in my electorate. They include Derby–West Kimberley, Halls Creek, Meekatharra, Menzies, Mt Magnet and Wyndham–East Kimberley. They are all areas of high need. I am pleased that the Minister for Housing raised the issue of housing and that he recognises that that is part of the solution, and I have said that in previous debates in this place. Housing has to be a big part of the solution. It constantly frustrates me when I go to a range of communities, particularly Aboriginal communities, throughout the state—I have raised the issue of Warralong with the minister—and see the chronic overcrowding in those communities. Housing is part of the solution. In the case of Warralong, over a hundred people are living in 10 two-bedroom houses, so it is no wonder that the kids cannot get washed at home because the water runs out or they have to get washed at school because there are too many people in the house to use the ablution services.

The “Dropping off the edge 2015” report ranked local government authorities throughout the state and it focused on a number of key indicators. It found that these disadvantaged areas have a range of problems that could be fixed and could take people out of disadvantage. It referred to low internet access and the fact that three out of four of the multiply disadvantaged localities had this characteristic. It also referred to disengaged young adults and the fact that 65 per cent of the multiply disadvantaged areas recorded very high numbers of young adults who were not engaged in employment or further education. It also highlighted the fact that low overall education levels was a key factor and that there were significant issues with poor reading results for year 3 students. It also looked at the issue of contact with the criminal justice system. Again, these areas show high rates of prison admissions. Finally, the report referred to low family income and unemployment and the fact that low family income was a significant factor in all these communities, as was high unemployment.

It is interesting that since those organisations did the first report in 2007, a number of communities are no longer on the list but a number of communities have joined the list. Places such as Carnarvon and Denmark were on the list previously, but they are no longer on the list. I have not looked into this properly to see why those communities have been removed from the list or whether some communities have just fallen in the past few years. It is very good research. I know that the state government, the Department for Child Protection and Family Support and the Department of Local Government and Communities participate in the research. I encourage members to look at it; it is certainly something that I will watch. I again thank the honourable member for moving this motion today.

Motion lapsed, pursuant to standing orders.