

Division 36: Communities — Service 1, Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering, \$170 879 000 —

Ms L.L. Baker, Chair.

Mr M.P. Murray, Minister for Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering.

Ms M. Andrews, Director General.

Mrs R. Green, Deputy Director General, Community Service.

Mr N. Wijayadasa, Interim Chief Finance Officer.

Mr M. Richardson, Director, Management, Accounting and Financial Analysis.

Mrs E. Ramage, Chief of Staff, Minister for Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: This estimates committee will be reported by Hansard. The daily proof *Hansard* will be available the following day. It is the intention of the Chair to ensure that as many questions as possible are asked and answered and that both questions and answers are short and to the point. The estimates committee's consideration of the estimates will be restricted to discussion of those items for which a vote of money is proposed in the consolidated account. Questions must be clearly related to a page number, item, program or amount in the current division. Members should give these details in preface to their question. If a division or service is the responsibility of more than one minister, a minister shall be examined only in relation to their portfolio responsibilities.

The minister may agree to provide supplementary information to the committee rather than asking that the question be put on notice for the next sitting week. I ask the minister to clearly indicate what supplementary information he agrees to provide and I will then allocate a reference number. If supplementary information is to be provided, I seek the minister's cooperation in ensuring that it is delivered to the principal clerk by Friday, 30 October 2020. I caution members that if a minister asks that a matter be put on notice, it is up to the member to lodge the question on notice through the online questions system.

Member for North West Central.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Thank you, Madam Chair.

The CHAIR: Sorry, we just have to get our advisers; I forgot. Go ahead, minister.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Thank you, Madam Chair. I started to panic straightaway! I thought we were lost. Good evening to everyone in the room. This will be my last estimates over the period of this government.

The CHAIR: Make it painless!

Mr M.P. MURRAY: As usual, it is always one of the areas where the staff work extremely hard. I am sure everyone in this room would appreciate the work that has been done for each estimates over the years by the staff behind me here, as well as my personal staff. Having said that, I will now introduce the people around the room.

[Witnesses introduced.]

The CHAIR: Member for North West Central, we are back with you.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Can I put on record my thanks to the minister; it has been a pleasure being in Parliament with him. During 21 years, he has served his constituency extremely well for sport and rec.

We are doing Seniors and Ageing; Volunteering. I have been going through division 36. The only words I can see that relate to the minister's portfolios are on page 518, where it has the item "Seniors Support Initiatives" under "COVID-19 WA Recovery Plan". I cannot see anything else in division 36 that relates to the minister's portfolios. Perhaps the minister can explain what projects are being done in his portfolio areas.

The CHAIR: Is the member on division 36?

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Yes.

The CHAIR: Good.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Is the member talking about the item "Seniors Support Initiatives"?

Mr V.A. CATANIA: That is the only thing I can see that is related to the minister's portfolios, unless he can pick out anything else there.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: As we know, the population in the seniors age group is increasing. We expect an increase of another 20-odd per cent of people who will qualify for a Seniors Card in the near future. That will take some managing into the near future because of our structure in Australia, and Australia alone, in its ageing population. We have been working on a number of areas. Probably one of my favourite ones is—if we go straight to it—the

Seniors Card. We very strongly support that area. It is one of those things that probably some people would say that more should be more, but I think where it is at the moment is quite fair and reasonable. People get a bit of a shake-up when they lose their Seniors Card, which has many benefits including a reduction in rates and a discount booklet. I forget how many; I think there are a huge amount, in the hundreds, of discount areas that can be utilised, from insurance through to security. Those sorts of things are done right across the line.

Today, approximately 400 000 people are in receipt of a Seniors Card, which offers possibly the most generous Seniors Card rebates in Australia. Sometimes that is forgotten because people compare with the other states, but they do not compare with the bottom line about how much is in there. In recent times, people have been reluctant to go out. They have been able to get services to their door through the Seniors Card booklet because people do deliveries and things like that. That has been very, very important under the COVID-19 situation. When it is looked at from that point, a lot is done, but overall we included \$250 000 towards the new age-friendly communities social connectivity grants program. That is \$250 000 that was not there before. Again, that is to reconnect seniors who have experienced isolation. We know that that has been a problem under COVID.

I will use an example of that. At a seniors meeting in Geraldton, we expected about 25 people to come; maybe 30, which would have been a good crowd, as the member would know when he is out on the block like that. We got nearly 100 people there. I could not quite work out what that was about. After we listened, we realised that that was because of insecurity within the seniors area, and they need reassuring. For some of those people, that was probably the first time they had been out for some weeks. They were reading and listening to the press about the seniors issue on the east coast, which is disastrous, to say the least, and about the older people who were coming into contact with others and getting COVID-19 and many of them dying.

It was one of those experiences of learning as you go along in an area that we needed to support. I have some figures here. We committed an additional \$430 000 for older people in Western Australia to support them along the lines and to help local governments adjust. We had some problems in that area, too. In the first instance, when news of COVID-19 was announced and the lockdowns were implemented in WA, we had volunteers out there who were saying, "We'll help the seniors", but they were not ready for that because the volunteers could have been the people who were spreading the disease. We had to go out there and adjust the way people were thinking about how they could help seniors. A big part of the funding was about educating people to make sure that there was no transmission of the disease by goodwill. It was goodwill. We only had to look on Facebook to see that people were asking how they could help some of the older people in the community. We had to be careful. When we funded that, we had to make sure that people understood their responsibilities along those lines with the applications that were there, and many of the issues that came out along the way had to be addressed.

Another issue that has been talked about recently is mental health. Again, we have come to understand that people being kept away from their siblings, parents and grandparents causes distress, and that was not really acknowledged in the first round. In fact, I have to relay a story. I do not mind telling members what happened in that area. Even after it was "safe" to allow visitations, some aged-care facilities would still not allow people to visit—I think that was pretty average, to say the least—because they were being risk-averse, which I understood. I was able to get a line to the Prime Minister, who used our lines exclusively to say, "Come on, aged care providers. Have a think about what you're doing and the mental torment that it is causing." Again, we had to help the community by putting in the funds to do that.

[8.10 pm]

Mr V.A. CATANIA: That is interesting. On the scenario of people in aged care facilities not being able to see family members, and the stresses and strains that causes on both sides, does the minister believe that if there were an outbreak, we in Western Australia are prepared to deal with the most vulnerable being those who live in aged care facilities? Is the state prepared to ensure their safety?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Yes, I do, because we learnt from the east coast, and very quickly, about what went wrong. It was very good of the federal Minister for Aged Care and Senior Australians to give me his phone number. He rang on one occasion to tell me exactly what had happened on the east coast so that the same mistakes were not repeated over here. We were prepared for that. Of course, masks and personal protective equipment were in short supply, but then supplies arrived by planes from different parts of the world. It was a bit of a shock to me that a minister who was certainly not of our political ilk rang me to say, "This is what happened." He said how difficult it was in some aged care facilities because people had dementia and mental problems and they could not be locked away. They had to be in a community area and once it got in there, they could not stop that isolation. We were very cautious about not bringing the disease in from the outside. There was more of a barrier in aged care facilities, reminding the member that aged care is the responsibility of the federal government. But in saying that, we did our darnedest to make sure that there would be no transmission in those aged care units.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Given the isolation that our seniors can feel and do feel and the hard border situation, has the Minister for Seniors and Ageing here in Western Australia been inundated with calls from people from over east

who want to see their loved ones here or vice versa? Obviously, people have limited time on this earth and they want to see their loved ones.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: In the first instance, there was not a major problem in that area, but as time went on and some of those facilities did not open up, there was a problem. I will use an example of children swimming in the pool at a facility, who had to yell across to their dad who was sitting inside the facility. That was the way they communicated with him. The member for North West Central should think about it this way, with his background: the person had a form of dementia and he had reverted back to speaking only Italian. No-one at the aged-care facility spoke Italian. The member can imagine the isolation that he felt. They decided to hook him up on a Skype call. He was in an advanced state of dementia and he could not understand why his kids were playing in a movie on the screen. How bad is that? I agree that it is a bit funny to hear it, but how bad was his isolation? I believe that we could have done a lot more with further guidance from the federal government, including speaking doorways, or screens with a speaker through the middle so that a resident could be wheeled up to it.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: That takes time to do.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: That is right, and it was the first time around. I hope that we do not get a second wave. Some of the aged-care facilities used extremely crude methods to pull some more money out of the federal government. They would not change their methods and said it was all about costs. Although there was a small increase in the funding over the COVID period, the way they used those people in aged-care facilities to get more money out of the federal government was very crude. I think that was wrong.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I do not disagree with the minister but I can provide plenty of examples in which governments of all political persuasions play politics at the behest of seniors that hurt seniors. The classic example—I know that the minister knows this very well—is the Carnarvon aged care facility and the government's decision to defer it for four years. It will be five years by the time it is built. There are plenty of examples of a number of people who have died subsequently because of penny pinching by the government.

The CHAIR: Member, you need to relate something to the budget rather than having a go at the minister. I pass to the member for Kalgoorlie.

Mr K.M. O'DONNELL: Greetings, minister. I refer to page 520, the sixth item, line 4. Through the WA recovery plan, how much of the \$430 000 will be spent on senior support initiatives in my electorate in the goldfields, and what will those support initiatives be?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I thank the member for that question. I think I probably answered the question about where some of the money is being spent in the first round. I have a note with the figure because it is very important. I have lost the note. Do not worry about that. Here we go, I am getting organised. I could have passed it on. Okay. Now I am back to square one. The \$430 000 was focused on reconnecting those people with their communities, including \$250 000 for the new age-friendly community social connectivity grants program, which will support local projects and initiatives to reconnect seniors who have experienced isolation, which we have just talked about at length. While the applications were open, there was significant interest from regional local governments because of size factors. Work is still being done in that area to see what can be done to help people in those facilities, such as those in Kalgoorlie and even down in my area of Capel, where there are a couple of reasonably sized facilities. In March, we established the COVID-19 seniors task force to identify and address the issues that the member is talking about. We have not been sitting on our hands as such. As I said about the Geraldton meeting, it woke me up a bit to see that those people needed information. They did not necessarily need a pat on the back. They needed straight-out information so that they could make their own decisions. I think that was very important. It is not all about money; it is about communication so that people are not frightened in their own homes. In some cases regional areas, because they are smaller, have been far better managed and are far more aware of problems of isolation.

[8.20 pm]

Ms L. METTAM: Hello, minister. My question relates to "Spending Changes" on page 518. It relates to the section that the member for North West Central referred to—that is, "State Emergency Response" and "Incident Management Team" under "Other COVID-19" new initiatives. There is some funding attached there.

The CHAIR: I doubt whether that is part of this portfolio, member for Vasse. It is very tricky, but you can only focus on things that have to do with this minister, which are seniors, ageing and volunteering. If you have a question about state emergency response teams, I think another division in the Department of Communities will be dealing with that. Minister, we are not dealing with the question because it is the wrong division, but I am pretty sure I am right in thinking that it will be in a Department of Communities hearing a bit later.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Can I reframe that question? Can I have a crack at that question?

The CHAIR: As long as it is not about the State Emergency Service.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I refer to “Seniors Support Initiatives” under “COVID-19 WA Recovery Plan” on page 518. The minister has spoken about the \$430 000. Is part of that \$430 000 going towards testing in aged-care facilities? Is testing occurring in our aged-care facilities from the \$430 000, or is any testing occurring at all to make sure that there is not an outbreak of COVID-19 amongst the most vulnerable people in our society?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: That falls more into the health portfolio than mine.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I am sure it does, but is the minister aware of any testing happening?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: I will defer to the director general.

Ms M. Andrews: I can answer, if the member is happy with a general answer. As the minister indicated, under the emergency management framework, the COVID-19 emergency response is being led out of the Department of Health in partnership with the Western Australia Police Force. The Department of Communities has formal responsibilities under the emergency management framework for welfare. Our responsibilities are about the welfare component of the emergency management framework. We have our own welfare incident coordination centre. We are participating in the planning, preparation and exercising that is going on right now, and has been for some time, to prepare for an outbreak. Facilities such as aged-care facilities are included in that planning. As the minister indicated, there are many lessons to be learnt from Victoria. One of those lessons was about the clarity of roles and responsibilities between the commonwealth and the state and so on. Without being too trite about people all being together, an emergency is not a moment for the state to hold back. That was a significant message for us.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: Please bear with me. Selected schools have testing occurring every month on selected people to make sure that COVID-19 is not there. I think that Carnarvon Community College has testing every month. Surely, if we are testing in schools, is testing occurring in our aged-care facilities? I would have thought that the Minister for Seniors and Ageing would be aware whether testing was occurring—not every day, but like schools, every month or two to make sure that there is no community transmission of COVID-19.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Again, I will defer.

Ms M. Andrews: When the member is using the language of testing, because testing has a few different meanings —

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I mean testing for COVID-19.

Ms M. Andrews: I am talking about outbreak planning and preparation and scenario activity. We are involved in that work. We do not have any involvement in testing for COVID.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: I realise that the department would not. The question I am asking is whether the minister is aware of testing occurring, as is done in schools? Is the Minister for Seniors and Ageing aware of any testing regimes that are occurring to make sure, as we do in the education system, that we are definitely COVID-19 free?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Again, I defer.

The CHAIR: We are getting a little far from this division.

Ms M. Andrews: It is straying out of my responsibilities. I do not feel that I am in a position to answer that.

The CHAIR: I do not know that we can be asking people —

Mr V.A. CATANIA: The minister is not aware of any testing occurring in aged care facilities, as the minister responsible for our seniors and ageing—is that correct?

Mr M.P. MURRAY: Again, that is more under the health area than ours. Ours is about making sure that the properties and areas are run properly. I am not sure whether the member is talking about compulsory testing or voluntary testing.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: It is any testing. I would have thought with our most vulnerable people being our seniors that they would be being tested.

Mr M.P. MURRAY: That would certainly come under the Minister for Health.

The CHAIR: Fair go. We have had a whack at it. I do not think I should let this continue anymore.

Mr V.A. CATANIA: It is very important.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is, but for Health.

Mr K.M. O'DONNELL: I refer to item 11, “Living Supports and Care for People with Disability” on page 533.

The CHAIR: I just need to stop you for one minute. This might be related to the disability portfolio. What is your question going to be, member?

Mr K.M. O'DONNELL: It is going to be about the drop in employees. My understanding was that item 11 —

The CHAIR: It is a very complicated process. I understand that. We can only question this minister about seniors, ageing and volunteering.

Extract from *Hansard*

[ASSEMBLY ESTIMATES COMMITTEE A — Wednesday, 21 October 2020]

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Chair; Mr Mick Murray; Mr Vincent Catania; Mr Kyran O'Donnell; Ms Libby Mettam; Mr John Carey

Mr K.M. O'DONNELL: I was incorporating senior people with disabilities.

The CHAIR: The member would not be the first to do that. Member for Vasse?

Ms L. METTAM: I have a question under the next division.

Mr K.M. O'DONNELL: Just a final question. I refer the minister to the table of contents at the start. If we look just above “Community Services”, there is a section for the Animal Resources Authority. There is also a section for the Chemistry Centre —

The CHAIR: Member, that is nothing to do with this.

Mr J.N. CAREY: Chair, point of order. This does not relate to any division. It is not for general commentary.

The CHAIR: Yes, got it. Sorry, member.

Mr K.M. O'DONNELL: I was going to say, there is nothing for seniors and volunteering. It is so hard to follow and find. There is not even a section for it.

[8.30 pm]

The CHAIR: I think I understand, and I have said several times tonight that this is not a clear process. If the member has questions about issues to do with seniors, ageing and volunteering that cross those areas, it is appropriate to ask them, but I cannot help him any further than that at the moment.

The appropriation was recommended.