

WATER CORPORATION — HARDSHIP MEASURES

290. Ms J.M. FREEMAN to the Minister for Water:

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's commitment to assisting those facing hardship in our community. Can the minister outline to the house what measures the government is taking to help people having difficulty paying their water bills?

Mr D.J. KELLY replied:

I thank the member for the question. Before I respond, I would like to acknowledge the members of the Jubilee Action Group in the gallery here today, who assisted me to run a campaign to close down a drug house in their community not that long ago. They are here with us today in the gallery and I thank them for the hard work they put into the community.

I thank the member for the question about measures the state government is taking to assist people to pay their water bills. In opposition, one of the things that concerned me greatly was that each year the Water Corporation was restricting the water supply of over 2 000 customers a year for the non-payment of bills. That number was climbing almost every year. To restrict the water supply of any family is a drastic measure. I think the previous government resorted to that action far too readily, so when we came to government, approximately nine families a day in Western Australia were having their water restricted for non-payment issues. When we came to government, I asked the Water Corporation to review its practices to see whether we could deal with this issue in a different way. I am pleased to say that the Water Corporation talked to customers who were at risk of having their water restricted. As a result, we have cut by over 50 per cent the number of customers who were having their water restricted for non-payment issues. I am confident that we can get that number down even further.

What is even more pleasing is that as a result of the Water Corporation talking to those customers—its officers made over 700 house visits—it gained a greater understanding of some of the issues that affect people who find it difficult to pay their water bills. As a result of that work, we announced last week a raft of new measures to further assist people who have difficulty paying their water bills. One of the programs members opposite will be most interested in is called Medical Assist. From 1 July, we will give customers on home dialysis a free allocation of up to 180 000 litres of water a year. Home dialysis results in people having massive water bills through no fault of their own. We worked with Kidney Health Australia to come up with this program. It will save customers who have home dialysis over \$400 a year. The chief executive officer of Kidney Health Australia, Dr Lisa Murphy, said —

“I am thrilled that Water Corporation will be helping to ease the financial burden faced by home dialysis patients.

“Patients who aren't concession card holders can be out of pocket around \$1,500 each year due to water, power and other costs associated with home dialysis.

“On top of this, living with end stage renal failure can make maintaining employment challenging, and so the Medical Assist program will provide vital financial relief to the hundreds of home dialysis patients living in Western Australia.”

That is a new program that will operate from 1 July. It will help hundreds of dialysis patients in Western Australia with 180 000 litres of free water, simply because, as a government, we talked to customers who have difficulty.

We also introduced two other schemes—Start Over and Time Assist. Time Assist will help customers who, through some catastrophic event, find it difficult to pay their bills.

Point of Order

Mrs L.M. HARVEY: In the spirit of Time Assist, we have a truncated question time today and the minister has been on his feet for over four minutes reading a media release.

The SPEAKER: You are wasting time there, but I call on the minister to get on with it, please.

Questions Without Notice Resumed

Mr D.J. KELLY: The point of the question today is to demonstrate to members opposite the great lengths we are going to to assist Water Corporation customers and customers of Aqwest and Busselton Water with paying bills in a way the previous Barnett government never did.

Several members interjected.

The SPEAKER: Members! I will have no more screaming out like that please, although it was a long speech. I felt like screaming myself!