

REDRESS WA — ABUSE VICTIMS

Statement

HON COL HOLT (South West) [10.00 pm]: Apologies, Mr President, for not indicating earlier my willingness to speak. I rise tonight in support of some constituents who came into my office the week before last. Three gentlemen—a couple about my age and one a little younger—told me their story about living at St Andrews in Katanning and the abuse they suffered from one of the masters, Dennis John McKenna. I am sure that some members are aware of the story. I would like to acknowledge those gentlemen for coming in and sharing their story with me. As a relatively new member of Parliament and someone who has come from a fairly sheltered background, it was quite confronting to hear their story and difficult to know what to say to them. Interestingly, I could really associate with the two gentlemen who were about my age. I boarded at Swanleigh at about the same time they were boarding at St Andrews. I could definitely see what they were talking about in terms of being victims without a voice in that sort of situation in which the master of the facility was so well trusted by everyone within the facility and outside. This guy was a citizen of the year in Katanning three times. It was absolutely astounding that that charade or masquerade could continue at such levels that no-one believed what was going on in the boarding house.

I would also like to acknowledge their bravery in accessing the services of Redress WA and why they were very disappointed at the amount of money they received from Redress. Obviously that access to Redress has led to charges being laid against that gentleman and a court case is pending. In telling me their stories, the impact of what those gentlemen have been through has been extensive and at a high level. Although those guys have been brave enough to come forward, there are probably many others who have not. These gentlemen certainly need some assistance with counselling and I think they are getting it in most cases, or at least that is what they have told me. In some of those situations, when we ask whether everything is okay, they say that everything is fine and they are accessing counselling but we probably have to ask about five times before we get the truth about how they are travelling and how they are going. At one point one guy said to me that he did not think his mate was going so well.

I do not think we quite understand the impact on our society of the abuse that occurred at St Andrews. It went on for fifteen years, and a lot of people were impacted. I am talking about people who were children at that time but are now in that phase of their life in our communities where they are taking on parenting, leadership and community civic roles. It would be quite astounding to see how those people are now coping with the ramifications of what they went through 20 years ago. I implore all members to think about how we might support those people who were victims in Katanning. I know they are now spread all over the state. Many are not with us any more but those who are are really suffering. I know that they are looking at ex gratia payments and some sort of court action. I will be supporting them in that action.

I will probably talk more about this matter again in other general debates, but I wanted to flag my interest in those people and my support for them coming forward. I remember that one of the guys brought his son into the office to tell his story; he would have been maybe 17 or 18 years of age. When the guy left my office, I asked him whether he had anything else to say. He said to me, “Listen and believe your kids. Sit down and actually listen to what they are telling you because there may well be a story behind what they are saying in terms of how they are coping with life or what the situations are in their life.” I think it would be pretty naive of all of us if we believed that those sorts of things that happened in Katanning 20 years ago were totally non-existent in our society now. I will therefore be sending a message to everyone in my electorate that we need to be vigilant on abuse, we need to listen to our children and we need to pick up some of the telltale signs of abuse. I will be assuring my constituents that, as a responsible government that runs organisations and facilities such as St Andrews, we are on the ball and we are watching what is going on. In closing I want to say thank you to those gentlemen for coming in to see me, for raising this issue with me as a new member of Parliament and for opening my eyes to some of those situations in a bit more detail.