

## GUIDE DOGS WA

### *Statement*

**HON ALISON XAMON (North Metropolitan)** [6.42 pm]: There is lots of talk about the need to create jobs at both the federal and state level, and for good reason, particularly because the COVID-19 pandemic means that we are likely to be looking at a recession next year and that means that we need to look at opportunities to create employment. I want to draw to members' attention a business case that has been put forward by Guide Dogs WA that is about creating jobs and addressing the longstanding need to deal with the backlog in the availability of guide dogs. As I have mentioned previously in this place, there is a backlog, a long waiting list, and not everyone who needs a guide dog is able to get one. Further, it costs a lot of money—about \$50 000—to train a guide dog, a cost that is effectively covered by charitable donations. We need to acknowledge the fantastic work that Guide Dogs WA does.

One of the things that Guide Dogs WA is looking to do is to set up and run what it describes as a world-class breeding program in multiple regions right across Western Australia. It is hoping to increase the number of available puppies in our state. It is looking to match between 70 and 100 guide dogs with people each year. It is very keen to broaden the reach of these dogs, which are highly trained, so that they can also meet the increasing need for autism assistance dogs, therapy dogs, dementia dogs, court dogs in the justice systems, post-traumatic stress disorder dogs and mental health assistance dogs, as well as guide dogs. The important role that these highly trained dogs play in the community has become increasingly understood. Guide Dogs is looking to create about 30 cadet traineeships and it estimates that it will result in 25 full-time equivalent new jobs. It is also seeking to create an additional 150 volunteer positions to enable this to happen. It is seeking a one-off contribution from government to establish the program. A lot of issues need to be addressed.

One of the problems is that suitable puppies are not being bred in our state. Guide dog puppies have to be purchased from either over east or New Zealand and that has created a number of issues. Guide Dogs WA has been particularly affected by the difficulty in sourcing puppies during COVID but it is finding that breeders, particularly those over east and in New Zealand, tend to hold onto the best-bred dogs, which means that the dogs they are being sent here are, what it terms, of a lower quality, which means that the dogs that are being bred here are not acclimatised to the Western Australian climate and so they are experiencing a disproportionate number of things such as skin allergies—and that is within the context of an already existing shortage of breeders across Australia. There is also a worldwide shortage of guide dog trainers and mobility instructors. Guide Dogs WA constantly struggles to recruit appropriately qualified trainers in Western Australia and, of course, it competes with the eastern states. It has come up with a solution to this involving the recruitment of top-level genetic expertise to ensure that it has dogs within Western Australia from which it can breed. It is looking to establish a partnership with a university over here and also building a network of volunteers to assist with the breeding program. It has estimated that if the program is able to proceed, up to 100 more people will benefit from the invaluable support of a guide dog each year.

Of course, we know that in addition to the enormous positive social impact that will have on people, for many it will enable them to return to or commence employment, which will obviously broaden the benefit even further to the wider economy and will mean more than simply the jobs that are created in the breeding program. Guide Dogs WA wants to create a cadet program for dog trainers and establish a partnership with a training body so that it can set up a remote postgraduate course in orientation and mobility speciality for allied health professionals. It wants to develop an advanced specialised cadet program for guide dog trainers and look at the availability of career progression. Hopefully, it can create a hub within Western Australia of guide dog trainers, who can then be utilised in other states and elsewhere, but this state will generate that expertise and make sure that it is meeting the need here within Western Australia.

Guide Dogs WA has put together a carefully costed business case and has identified that it will be able to establish a world-class breeding program with an investment of \$5 million, which it will match with \$5 million from money it has sourced from donations and bequests. Guide Dogs WA is not simply asking for money; it is well and truly putting its hand in its own pocket to achieve this outcome that will be beneficial for people who are visually impaired and blind and will create jobs and provide a suite of guide dogs that are able to assist in a whole range of other areas. That will have positive flow-on effects for our economy. I also note that Guide Dogs WA already has suitable premises to implement these measures. I think this is something members are likely to hear more about. I certainly encourage Guide Dogs WA to make this idea more widely known. It is a relatively modest investment, when we look at what could potentially be produced out of this and how beneficial it would be for so many in our community and also Australia-wide. These dogs are trained to support people who need a range of supports through dog therapy, whether they are the vision impaired, or blind, or they have autism, dementia, mental health issues or post-traumatic stress disorder, and also people who are vulnerable in our justice system and children with all kinds of disabilities. I think this is an exciting opportunity. We talk about jobs, but this is a really unique job with enormous flow-on benefits. I hope it can be seriously considered by government. I would be absolutely thrilled by any announcement or commitment at any point before the election to fund such a fantastic idea.

