

OUT-OF-HOME CARE — ABORIGINAL CHILDREN

**84. Ms L. DALTON to the Minister for Child Protection:**

I refer to the McGowan Labor government's commitment to keeping children safe and its efforts to address the over-representation of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care. Can the minister update the house on the Aboriginal family-led decision-making pilot in Geraldton and outline what it will mean when it comes to delivering positive outcomes for vulnerable children?

**Ms S.F. McGURK replied:**

I thank the member very much for the question. It was fantastic to be with her up in Geraldton last week to announce a particular initiative that I am very proud of. I think we will start to see some significant changes in the way that child protection decision-making is made in Western Australia. Sadly, Aboriginal children are over-represented in our child protection system. Nearly 57 per cent of our children in out-of-home care are Aboriginal. Members might be aware that it is a new measure in the Closing the Gap targets that we reduce the number of Aboriginal children in care. Of course, it is a difficult objective because we need to keep children safe so we cannot just say that we will take fewer children into care. Our objective is to keep children safe. That means that we need to work on early intervention with families whose children are at risk of coming into care. We have invested new money into that and allocated some of that money to dedicated Aboriginal organisations. So far, the results look very promising.

We are also looking at doing things differently. We will be reintroducing amendments to the Children and Community Services Act—that is the child protection legislation in this state—to increase in the legislation the role of Aboriginal organisations. Once a decision has been made for a child to come into care, it will increase the role that Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal families have in deciding where that child will be placed. One of the good models that many advocates have been pressing us to implement is called Aboriginal family-led decision-making. This is implemented particularly in Victoria and Queensland. I am very proud that our government has funded a pilot program for Aboriginal family-led decision-making. The model that we have decided to trial will be an independent Aboriginal facilitator convening a meeting of the Aboriginal family to see whether we can get some better safety outcomes and engagement by that family in relation to child protection. That was the announcement that I made in Geraldton with the member for Geraldton last week. It looks very promising.

I would like to thank Will Hayward from Curtin University and also Corina Martin from the Aboriginal Family Legal Services who convened a group of Aboriginal leaders to design this work. We will also have a pilot in the metropolitan area. This is all leading in the direction that, when we can, we will involve Aboriginal families and their representatives to try to prevent children from coming into care and, if children are brought into care, that families and their representative organisations have a say on where the children will be placed and to keep some cultural connection with those children. The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse identified that cultural connection and identity are important protective factors for Aboriginal children. I am really proud that, as the Minister for Child Protection over the last four years in the first McGowan government, as a result of some of that important work, we have now seen the first annual reduction in the number of non-Aboriginal children in care since 1998. After 20 years, we have seen the first reduction in numbers of non-Aboriginal children in care. In fact, the rates of growth for numbers of Aboriginal children in care is also going in the right direction. It is not a simple exercise, as I said, of just saying we will have fewer children in care. We need to make sure that children are safe, but we need to build the capacity of Aboriginal organisations and Aboriginal families to be involved in the decision-making to make sure the children are safe and are kept connected to their culture so we can get better outcomes for those young people and their families.