

LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL
Question on notice

21 NOV 2013

Tuesday, 15 October 2013

342. Hon Robin Chapple to the Minister for Child Protection.

I refer to a question without notice asked on 10 September 2013 regarding Aboriginal children under the care of the Department of Child Protection, and I ask:

- (a) can the Minister please provide reasons why the number of children in care in the Kimberley region is so much higher, as much as double in some instances, than in other regions of the State;
- (b) what monitoring is being undertaken to better understand the current situation throughout the State but especially in the Kimberley;
- (c) which policies of Government are contributing to the current dire situation;
- (d) does the Government consider the current situation to be acceptable;
- (e) if not, what steps are being taken to reduce the numbers of children in care in the Kimberley and elsewhere in the State;
- (f) can the Minister please provide reasons for the steady increase in the number of Aboriginal children in care each year from 2009 to 2013; and
- (g) what steps will the Government take to turn this trend around?

Answer

- (a) The number of children in the Kimberley region in the care of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the Department for Child Protection and Family Support (the Department) is not higher than other regions of the state with similar demographics. To illustrate, the proportion of Aboriginal children in care as a percentage of all Aboriginal children is:

4.5 per cent in the East and West Kimberley
4.9 per cent in the Pilbara
4.3 per cent in the Murchison.

Furthermore the average annual growth rate in the number of Aboriginal children in care in Western Australia has declined from an average of 17 per cent per year between 2003 and 2008, to 11 per cent between 2008 and 2013.

In the Kimberley region the rate has declined from an average annual growth rate of 83 per cent to seven per cent over the same period.

- (b) Child protection issues are complex and require multi-pronged approaches. To assist the Department to monitor and coordinate responses to child abuse a range of groups have been established across government and at the local level including:
 - the Child Safety Directors Group which is chaired by the Department comprises executive level officers of human service departments;
 - the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee and related subcommittees;

- Human Services Regional Managers Forums;
 - Child at Risk meetings held in Wyndham, Halls Creek, Kununurra, Balgo, Warmun and Kalumburu; and
 - Young People at Risk meetings held in Kununurra, Halls Creek, Broome, Derby, Fitzroy Crossing and the remote communities of Bidyadanga, Looma, Nookanbah, Djarindjin and commencing this month in One Arm Point.
- (c) It is recognised that the policies of previous governments have contributed to the current disadvantage experienced by Aboriginal people.

However this Government has taken very real and practical steps toward the social and economic development of Aboriginal people in Western Australia.

An Aboriginal Affairs Cabinet Subcommittee has recently been formed of which I am a member. This subcommittee is considering direct advice about how resources can be used to better respond to the health, mental health, education and other needs of the Aboriginal community.

- (d) In an ideal world there would not be a need for any child to be in care. However, the Department must act to make children safe and where a child is at risk, protective action has to be taken, including bringing a child into care if necessary. Aboriginal children are entitled to the same level of safety as all others.
- (e) Efforts to reduce the number of children in care have been a focus for this government and considerable investment has been made to further strengthen the services available to support Aboriginal children and their families. Overall funding from the Department for the Kimberley District has increased from \$10.8 million in 2007-08 to \$29.8 million in 2013-14, a total increase of \$19 million. Funding for community sector services in the Kimberley has increased from \$4.03 million in 2007-08 to over \$10.6 million in 2013-14. Specific initiatives include:
- Implementation of the Signs of Safety child protection practice framework which works to keep children at home where it is safe to do so;
 - Responsible Parenting Services, which includes the Parent Support and Best Beginnings programs;
 - Strong Families;
 - Operation Reset in partnership with the Western Australia Police;
 - Introduction of child protection income management and use of liquor restricted premises declarations, and
 - A large range of support services funded and provided through the community sector including counselling and healing programs.
- (f) The rate of Aboriginal children in care is increasing across every jurisdiction of Australia. National figures indicate that an Aboriginal child is 10 times more likely to be in care than a non-Aboriginal child. In part, this increase can be attributed to population growth and an increasing Aboriginal child population. However, the key drivers of children coming into care remain parental alcohol and drug use, domestic violence and mental health issues.
- (g) Aboriginal disadvantage and its impact on children require a whole of community and government response.

Importantly, when any child comes into care, a focus is placed on planning for reunification from the first day.

It is also notable that the majority of Aboriginal children in care are placed with a relative, where cultural connections can be maintained.

Approved
Kulurata