

REDRESS WA — COMPLETION

Statement by Minister for Community Services

HON ROBYN McSWEENEY (South West — Minister for Community Services) [10.16 am]: I take this opportunity to address members regarding the successful delivery and completion of the Redress WA scheme, which was designed to provide ex gratia payments to former care leavers for the abuse or neglect they suffered while in state care. This has not been an easy scheme to deliver. We dealt with the rawest of emotions from applicants who had their innocence taken away from them whilst in the care of the state and religious institutions.

To assess applications under the guidelines of this scheme, it was necessary to research and access care records, which for some applicants dated back more than 70 years. The Liberal–National government took ownership of this scheme when it came to government in 2008, and we put in place a structure to pay ex gratia payments to the many thousands of Western Australians who applied to the scheme. Importantly, applicants have told us that they felt they were treated with respect and sensitivity in telling their stories, some of which had never been told or disclosed to another person. I am pleased to announce that a total of 5 333 applicants have been paid an ex gratia payment under this scheme, with the last ex gratia payment offer sent on 2 September. Originally, the scheme had a budget of \$114 million set aside, of which \$90.2 million was allocated to ex gratia payments alone. We have since increased the total budget by an additional \$30 million to pay all eligible applicants who applied to Redress WA. The systems put in place to distribute these ex gratia payments met with Department of Treasury and Finance and Office of the Auditor General guidelines. To deliver a fair and equitable scheme for people eligible for an ex gratia payment, applications had to be assessed according to the level and severity of abuse and neglect experienced while in state care.

I have outlined in the past that we have made enhancements to how the scheme was originally designed to include a \$5 000 eligibility payment for applicants who passed away before their applications were assessed or approved. Sadly, some applicants passed away before their applications could be fully assessed. However, their estates did receive a \$5 000 eligibility payment. I am pleased that, although originally an applicant had no right to appeal their ex gratia offer, guidelines were changed to provide applicants with an opportunity to request a review of their assessment. The review could be undertaken either by an independent review panel or through the Ombudsman's office if an applicant believed an error of fact or process was made in how their application was assessed.

Another equally important decision was to remove the requirement for all applicants to sign a waiver when accepting an ex gratia payment, which meant that applicants did not lose their right to seek compensation through the court system if they were eligible. This decision, I am pleased to say, was supported by the Attorney General and by applicants themselves. In addition, the original guidelines stipulated that applicants receiving the maximum payment would be required to have psychological assessment to support their application. Removing this requirement meant applicants were not subject to the additional stresses and trauma that any psychological or medical assessments would have on them. Applicants throughout the process have also been advised they can request a copy of the documents explaining their payment decision prior to agreeing to their payment offer. This was an important step for us to take in offering a right of reply to our applicants. Redress WA has worked hard since the introduction of the scheme to put in place streamlined procedures and measures to ensure a consistent approach was applied to how applications were processed, to finalise completion of payments by the middle of this year.

I would like to both thank and acknowledge Redress WA staff, who have worked tirelessly to treat all applications with the due care and consideration they deserved throughout the delivery of this scheme. Listening to applicants tell their stories of abuse and neglect and reading these accounts could not have been an easy task, and I thank the staff for their dedication above and beyond what would be expected in the normal duties of employment.

I would like to also make particular mention of the executive director, Ms Stephanie Withers, who managed and has overseen every element of delivering this scheme. Ms Withers has done an exceptional job and worked tirelessly to make sure every person eligible for an ex gratia payment was assessed in a fair and equitable way.

I have personally thanked Redress staff and met many who told me that they took every opportunity to provide a nurturing and validating experience for applicants while they engaged with them. Their work under the scheme also provided them with a unique opportunity to be able to change a person's life for the better. Applicants have told staff that their experience of applying was therapeutic, and receiving a call from a Redress staff member and being able to tell someone personally what happened to them was a positive experience. The fact that applicants were able to request a copy of their records of their time in care validated their experience as being believed and

acknowledged, which for many was the most important part. I have also had feedback that the apology letter signed by me and the Premier was crucial to the healing process for many, and having an open line of contact with Redress staff while waiting for applications to be processed was reassuring.

Some may not be aware that many applicants have chosen to refer their cases of abuse and neglect to WA Police to bring perpetrators before the courts. Over one-third of applicants have requested referral to police and the first perpetrators have been charged directly as a result of Redress WA.

Redress WA has also assisted with providing counselling services to 3 666 people from the 26 Redress WA service providers; made an eligibility payment to 74 applicants who otherwise would have received nothing under the original guidelines of the scheme; provided over one-third of applicants with their care records so that they can see their story acknowledged and validated; paid as a priority 791 applicants who had a life-threatening illness or condition confirmed by a doctor's report; and provided assistance to 500 callers to the Redress help desk per week at the peak processing time. Redress WA was also equipped to be able to offer the services of a qualified social worker or psychologist to applicants throughout the life of the scheme.

In closing, I want to acknowledge, as I did last time when I gave a ministerial statement on Redress, the pain and suffering that all victims of child abuse have to live with each day of their lives. Late last year, I unveiled Western Australia's first official monument to the state's "Forgotten Australians" as an acknowledgement of the abuse and neglect suffered by thousands of Western Australians in state care. Although the scheme has now officially closed, the Redress WA help desk will remain open until all ex gratia payments are distributed. Email contacts to Redress WA will also remain active until mid-2012.

Consideration of the statement made an order of the day for the next sitting, on motion by **Hon Ed Dermer**.