



Parliamentary Debates

(HANSARD)

THIRTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT
FIRST SESSION
2009

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

Thursday, 10 September 2009

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Legislative Assembly

Thursday, 10 September 2009

THE SPEAKER (Mr G.A. Woodhams) took the chair at 9.00 am, and read prayers.

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SUICIDE

Statement by Minister for Indigenous Affairs

DR K.D. HAMES (Dawesville — Minister for Indigenous Affairs) [9.08 am]: Mr Speaker, before I make my three-minute statement, I acknowledge representatives from the Billard community here today in the Speaker's gallery.

I rise today to talk about suicide. It is a startling and saddening fact that more Australians die every year from suicide than are killed on our roads. For every suicide, there are approximately 30 suicide attempts. It is widely known that suicide rates are higher in rural and remote areas and that there has been an alarming increase in the incidence of suicide amongst our Indigenous communities. I recently visited such a community; a community ready to focus on the issue of suicide and its effect on its members. I was privileged to be invited to the Billard Aboriginal Community on the Dampier Peninsula, or Nirrumbuk, the home of the rainbow serpent, to participate in the Billard Blank Page Summit on Suicide. I would like to read an extract from Mary Victor O'Reeri's speech made in Canberra on 17 August 2009 about the reasons behind the summit being called. Mary is in the Speaker's gallery today.

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The Summit came from our own journey as a family. We lost our two brothers — Stephen Junior and Vincent — to suicide a few years ago. We found them hanging from the same fan in the same room in the same house in Beagle Bay within three years of each other. Stevo and Goodie as we called them, were young men who couldn't see their way clear to keep on living. They chose to die by their own hands in their early twenties.

The Billard Blank Page Summit was also attended by an extraordinary collection of 150 participants, including the Hon Jenny Macklin, federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Chief Justice Wayne Martin, Coroner Alistair Hope, Bishop Christopher Saunders of Broome, and Hon Helen Morton, MLC, along with representatives of many peak government and non-government organisations from all over Australia. All were there because we care, all were there because we acknowledge we are stuck and need a way forward and a way to help Indigenous communities stop feeling that they are "living between suicides", as I have heard it put.

I would like to acknowledge the amazing job that the Billard Learning Centre did in organising and running the summit. I would particularly like to acknowledge Stephen Victor Senior, Mary Victor O'Reeri and their extended families, Kari Kristiansen, the summit director, and the many participants, sponsors and volunteers all too numerous to mention now but who all contributed and made the summit the success it was.

This afternoon I will be presented with a communiqué from the summit by Mary Victor O'Reeri. I look forward to reading about the outcome of the summit and contributing to making a real change to the lives of people living with the issue of suicide in their community.

It is of note that my colleague Hon Graham Jacobs, Minister for Mental Health, is not in the house at present. At this moment he is officially launching the State Suicide Prevention Strategy. The Liberal-National government is committing \$13 million over the next four years to implement the strategy. The strategy calls for all state government departments to work together on a coordinated response to the issue. A Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention will, amongst other things, coordinate statewide initiatives for suicide prevention and identify communities requiring additional support.

I will conclude with a comment from Mary, who said, "We must do it together. It involves all of us." I agree with Mary, and I can assure her that this government is committed to working together with Aboriginal communities on this very important issue.

I advise members that at 3.00 pm this afternoon I will be presented with that communiqué in the Aboriginal People's Room, and I invite all members to attend if they wish.



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(HANSARD)

THIRTY-EIGHTH PARLIAMENT
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LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL

Thursday, 10 September 2009

Legislative Council

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THE PRESIDENT (Hon Barry House) took the chair at 11.00 am, and read prayers.

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WESTERN AUSTRALIAN SUICIDE PREVENTION STRATEGY 2009-2013

Statement by Parliamentary Secretary

HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [11.06 am]: Preventing suicide and suicidal behaviour is a key priority for the government of Western Australia, and today, on World Suicide Prevention Day 2009, the minister launched the government's strategy to reduce the number of suicides in Western Australia. The government has committed \$13 million over the next four years to implement the strategy.

Suicide is a tragedy that results in the loss of more than 250 loved and valuable lives in WA each year, and for every person who dies in this way, there are 10 other people whose attempt to kill themselves is so severe that they require admission to hospital. The effect of suicide and serious self-harm has a profound impact on the lives of those people close to them.

Throughout 2007, the Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention undertook a comprehensive consultation program throughout WA. The strategy responds to the key themes provided through that consultation, in particular the need for a whole-of-government approach; a focus on suicide prevention at a whole-of-community level; stronger coordination in prevention strategies, especially in response to emerging clusters of suicides; room for regional people to develop regional-specific strategies; and Aboriginal suicide having to be a priority.

The following people make up the new Ministerial Council for Suicide Prevention: John Franklyn, chairman, Lifeline WA; Vicki O'Donnell, chief executive officer, Derby Aboriginal Health Service Council; Adele Cox, lecturer, University of Western Australia; Rob Donovan, professor, Curtin University of Technology; Brian Mayfield, farmer; Sam Buckeridge, director, BGC Australia; Jade Lewis; Sam Walsh, chief executive, Rio Tinto Iron Ore Group; Christopher Wharton, chief executive officer, West Australian Newspaper Holdings Ltd; Eric Lumsden, director general, Department of Planning; Paul Hasleby, Fremantle Football Club of the AFL; Dr Steve Patchett, executive director, mental health, Department of Health; and Christopher Gostelow, manager, School Psychology Service.

The council will lead the statewide comprehensive strategy, which is well aligned with the national suicide prevention strategy, Life is for Living. Using existing recurrent resources, a non-government organisation will be contracted to undertake the day-to-day work of the council.

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Suicide prevention requires a comprehensive whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach. This approach depends on consistent and effective coordination between a range of services and agencies. Cabinet has mandated that all government departments will prioritise suicide prevention and participate in a coordinated response to the issues. This strategy provides a framework for the government to coordinate and invest in suicide prevention strategies at all levels of the community. Everyday people, frontline people, professionals involved in any work, families, friends and workmates will learn how to recognise that someone near to them may be feeling suicidal, how to talk to that person about it, and how to get the help if needed. This strategy signals a change in attitude; suicide is preventable and it is everybody's business.

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

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Suicide Prevention — Billard Community — Adjournment Debate

HON HELEN MORTON (East Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [5.27 pm]: Today is World Suicide Prevention Day and earlier today the Minister for Mental Health, as I mentioned, launched the government's \$13 million suicide prevention strategy. However, another significant event also took place this afternoon.

Members of the Billard Community presented a communiqué to the Deputy Premier outlining fundamental and immediate changes to stop the epidemic of suicide by Indigenous people. The Billard Community is located on an outstation of about 14 hectares, which is two and a half kilometres from Beagle Bay on the Dampier Peninsula, 122 kilometres north of Broome on the Cape Leveque Road. The community is normally home to about 65 people.

In July this year, Mary Victor O'Reeri and her father, Stephen Victor Snr—both present in the President's gallery this afternoon—along with other members of their family, members of the Billard Community and friends and

representatives of the community, invited about 150 people from across Australia to Billard for a blank page summit on suicide. People came from communities all over Australia. Some of the communities are currently experiencing horrific youth suicide rates—communities such as Balgo. They came from work areas as diverse as child protection, land management, justice, mental health, sport and recreation, the Australian Football League, counselling services, education and training, academia and churches. It was truly an expression of suicide prevention being everybody's business.

Together we all sat down on the pindan of the Kimberley uninterrupted for five days to talk about ways to stop young Indigenous people killing themselves. Mary and Stephen Victor Snr also invited, for shorter periods throughout the five days, Chief Justice Wayne Martin; the Western Australian State Coroner, Alastair Hope; the Western Australian Deputy Premier, Minister for Health and Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Dr Kim Hames; federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin; and Bishop Christopher Saunders.

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Along with Mr John Franklin, the new chairperson of the Ministerial Council on Suicide Prevention, I was able to stay for the full five days of the summit.

Members might ask what inspired the Victor family to take on such a monumental task. Mary's two brothers—Steven Victor, 23, and Vincent Victor, 25,—died by suicide just two days apart. Since Stevo and Goodie, as they were known, died the Billard Aboriginal Community has focused on developing a strong life base for the younger generations, particularly centred on education and meaningful work.

Mary is a trained primary school teacher and is the executive director of the Billard Learning Centre and she is also responsible for the overall operation of the community's activities, its external relationships, relationships and ongoing planning.

The summit was called the "Blank Page Summit" and Mary very eloquently explained the reason for that. My notes indicate that she said —

We can change many things for our people if we have the will and the wisdom to do it—everything is possible. It's time for a new conversation about what matters most for our people in the 21st century.

We can only start with a blank page if we are indeed going to have a new conversation. A blank page is what we must offer to ourselves and others. There is a great power and joy in us filling up those pages together.

In opening the summit Mary said, again according to my notes —

Friends and countrymen, when we lost not one but two boys—our brothers and my parents' beautiful sons—we could have become the walking dead ourselves. We could have benchmarked suicide as a fault line within our family. But our resolution was not to get stranded.

This summit is about more than hope—it is about recasting the die at the highest level within ourselves. Today has come about because we decided as a family to move out of the shadows and trust our instincts.

I can tell members that they did. The summit facilities were constructed on site for 150 people, with volunteers. We enjoyed the most wonderful conversations, heard the most heartbreaking stories and met many inspirational people. That was apart from the dancing at night, the wonderful outback catering, great yarns around the campfires and somewhat interrupted sleep on camp stretchers in two-man tents. I feel very sorry for the young woman who shared a two-man tent with me.

Hon Liz Behjat: Why?

Hon HELEN MORTON: Because I snore.

Everything worked absolutely perfectly from the minute the bagpipes woke us at six o'clock in the morning. That was our wakeup call every morning.

I will give two examples of how wonderful this summit was for me. We had a breakout group at one stage of about 10 people. I was included in a group of people whom I had not previously met. Many were traditional people for whom English was their third or fourth language. We were pondering our difficult task, and as usual I had plenty to say. One chap, George from Balgo, had his eyes shut, I thought, and seemingly was not taking much notice of what people were saying. After about half an hour of all of us talking, we did our roundup of the group's views and George spoke for the first time. He had produced an amazing drawing, which he interpreted for us in about five minutes. In that drawing and in that interpretation he captured and integrated all the conversations of the entire group for the past half hour. I learned not to underestimate George.

My second example is that on the last day we broke up into three large groups. The women were in one group, the men in another and the young folk in another. We had a serious task to come up with; that is, how to make families strong. We reassembled in about three quarters of an hour and the women presented their information, the men did the same and then the kids did theirs. The kids presented their findings in the form of a play, clearly depicting roles of

a functional family and a dysfunctional family. They left absolutely no doubt at all about what they saw as the responsibility of family in regards to the young folk.

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People spoke openly about grog and gunja, family breakdown and community decay. They described humbug in the context of violence and feuding. In the same way that people react to a heart attack and stop doing things that cause angina et cetera, they talked about restricting the things that trigger slow or spontaneous suicide. The result of the summit was a call to action to restructure the way we address suicide prevention through the family and our communities and with all of us working together. I was absolutely thrilled to see the close fit of the summit communiqué to the state suicide prevention plan, which at that stage was still in draft form. The communiqué is specific to the Kimberley but relevant to the rest of Australia.

The key messages of the communiqué are: to create suicide-proof families through self-imposed conditions such as no grog, no illegal drugs, no child neglect and abuse, no pornography and adherence to a community code of conduct and agreement to use a formal dispute resolution process to resolve feuds; to build communities that are strong on effective internal problem solving, a strong sense of civic virtue and shared recreational and cultural activities open to all; and to train families to be families that can save the lives of people at risk right now, that can be functional and safe families and that nurture individual growth within the family environment and have the capacity for healing and self-care and being able to act and save the lives of the most distressed and acutely troubled people in the community.

I salute the courage of the Victor family and the endeavour of the Billard community in bringing this successful summit together, ably assisted by Kari Kristiansen, the executive advisor to the Billard Aboriginal community and summit director, and Sam Mostyn, the summit facilitator. This family and community are not looking for excuses or for someone else to take responsibility for their circumstances. They are focusing on empowering their own community to make sure their kids have a good education and a safe place to live and that they develop respect for their culture and can easily integrate as and when they need to both their Aboriginal culture and non-Aboriginal elements into their total lifestyle. I thank Stephen Victor and Mary Victor O'Reeri for attending the WA Parliament to present this important communiqué to the Deputy Premier today. I table a copy of the blank page summit communiqué.

[See paper 1140.]