



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Main Committee

ADJOURNMENT

Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

SPEECH

Thursday, 23 June 2005

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Questioner
Speaker Plibersek, Tanya, MP

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Ms PLIBERSEK (Sydney) (12.30 pm)—I want to speak very briefly today on the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program. This very important program commenced in January 1985 and is designed to address the needs of Australia's homeless people. In December 2004, the Howard government announced its funding offer to the states and territories for the fifth round of funding for the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program, known as SAAP 5, which is for the forward five years and is proposed to start from 1 July 2005. The Commonwealth's offer is an allocation of \$931 million over five years, with indexation of just 2.1 per cent. This represents no increase in Commonwealth funding for the SAAP agreement beyond indexation, despite the fact that the Homeless People in SAAP: National Data Collection Annual Report 2003-04—the government's own report—outlined that the program was operating at capacity and needed a funding injection of 15 per cent just to meet unmet demand. We hear now that this 15 per cent is needed just to keep open the doors of many of the homeless shelters that I deal with, including women's refugees.

During budget estimates the government admitted that every day, nationally, around 300 people are turned away from Supported Accommodation Assistance Program services. That is a very significant number of people. Of those people, a substantial number are women and children who become homeless because they are fleeing domestic violence. Around 20 per cent of people who seek assistance do so because of domestic violence. In addition, around 22 per cent of the services funded under this program are targeted at that demand. Fifty-eight per cent of all SAAP clients are women.

Starting in March 2005, the New South Wales Women's Refuge Resource Centre asked all its member refuges to send a letter to Minister Patterson whenever they had to turn women and children away from their centre's services, so that the minister would become aware of the human effects of the government's refusal to increase SAAP funding. To date, 16 refuges have participated by sending 150 letters to the minister, telling of 512 women and 585 children being turned away from supported accommodation at refuges—I repeat: 585 children. Most of these refuges are in regional areas such as Tamworth, Maitland, Ulandra, Kempsey, Tweed Shire, Wagga Wagga, Katoomba, the Central Coast, Forbes and Woy Woy. If a person is turned away from such a service in one of these towns, they have nowhere else to go, as most of the towns have one refuge—and that is it. It is common that women and children fleeing home because of domestic violence do so with just the clothes they stand up in. They seldom have money or possessions with them. So to be turned away from a refuge is dire indeed.

Women's refuges play a vital role in assisting women and children escaping from domestic violence and in trying to prevent them from becoming homeless. When a woman and her children finally gain the courage to leave a violent man and go to a refuge but are told that there is no room for them, in many cases they will return home—and the consequences of that are quite disastrous. One refuge on the Central Coast, in some of its letters to the minister, outlined the circumstances of people who were turned away. It told of a 33-year-old woman who had been homeless for over 12 months since leaving a violent partner; a 26-year-old mother with two children, aged nine and four; a 21-year-old woman with a 19-month-old son; a woman with two children who had been living out of her car for the previous three days; and a woman with four children who had stayed in another refuge for eight weeks. They also told of a woman with four children, aged 17, 15, 11 and 10—her 15-year-old daughter also had a very young baby—who had been refused 17 rentals. They also told of a woman with three children who had been referred by the Newcastle Domestic Violence Information and Referral Line.

We are letting these people down by not providing adequate funding for them. We encourage women to leave violent situations but, when they do, the first place they turn to tells them there is no room at the inn. They have no alternative but to go back to violent partners. (*Time expired*)