



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**PRIVATE MEMBERS' BUSINESS**

**Social Services**

**SPEECH**

**Monday, 2 March 2015**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

**Date** Monday, 2 March 2015  
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**Questioner**  
**Speaker** Chesters, Lisa, MP

**Source** House  
**Proof** No  
**Responder**  
**Question No.**

**Ms CHESTERS** (Bendigo) (11:20): I second the motion. I would like to speak about how the cuts to the community service grants will affect my electorate of Bendigo but also, more broadly, regional Australia. I, being the second speaker to this motion, also think we should note at this point that there is nobody from the government backbench speaking on this motion and how appalling—

**Mr Christensen:** Sorry?

**Ms CHESTERS:** Oh, there is one. I stand corrected. There is somebody at the bottom of the speaking list. One sole person from the government backbench and the government ranks is speaking on this motion. I think it speaks volumes about the nature of this government that they acknowledge that these cuts are unpopular—and there is only one backbencher or marginal seat member willing to put their name to it—but they are not willing to act and do anything about these cuts. This motion gave them an opportunity to stand up in this House to say that they were going to reverse the decision to cut \$270 million from community grants. Instead, except for one sole person—and it should be noted that one individual does not form a government—all of them are in hiding and not willing to speak up or speak about these funding cuts and how they affect our community.

As has been mentioned, these grants being cut demonstrates not only the cruelty of this government but also the incompetence. As we have heard, many of these organisations were given a short time frame in which to apply for funding so that they could continue to deliver services to some of the most vulnerable in our community. Some of these organisations have for decades been delivering emergency relief, financial counselling support and related programs to the most vulnerable in our communities. Not only were they given a short time frame in which to reapply for funding, but the deadline within which they would find out about their funding continued to be extended and extended.

In December last year I remember meeting with Lisa Simpson, the financial counselling services coordinator with Bendigo Community Health, who said to me, 'We still do not know if we can continue this service next year'. The Bendigo Community Health financial services team supports people who have put their hands up to say they are in trouble. Quite often they are referred to this section of Bendigo Community Health from another service. They work with these individuals to help them get back on track, so they can get themselves out of debt. These are people who have acknowledged that they have financial stress, and they are seeking help. She said at the time, 'We don't know if we can continue to offer this service next year, because we still don't know.' The incompetence of this government to then let people know on Christmas Eve—cruel, but also incompetent, because who can rearrange services on Christmas Eve? Very few organisations have the capability to scramble that way. The organisation was then notified a few weeks ago that they could continue their service until the end of March. Here we are in the first week of March, and they do not know if they will get the opportunity and the support to continue their services into April or May.

Another organisation I wish to highlight is Bendigo Family and Financial Services. This organisation provides small loans, financial management training, counselling and emergency relief to those who are struggling due to a range of various reasons—loss of work, sickness, inability to work—and helps these families living on the margins to get on top of their debt. The organisation was established in 2006 to help break the generational poverty cycle that we have in Bendigo. The organisation has roughly 10 part-time staff, and this funding went towards helping to pay those wages. There are also 70 volunteers. They have a motto that if you receive help we would like you to help others. 'Family', in their title, does not just mean the families they help, but the family environment of the organisation. When we got together for a meeting I remember learning firsthand how important this service is. Over 100 people came to share their experiences.

These organisations are now at risk of closing because of this government's cruel decision to cut their funding. I call on the government to reverse their decision not to support this motion.