

## HOMELESSNESS

[2.37 p.m.]

**Mr MARTIN** (Question) - My question is to the honourable Minister for Human Services. Minister, earlier this year the then Premier, in his state of the State speech, said that it is unacceptable for any Tasmanian to be homeless, which I am sure you would agree with, and yet then set a benchmark committing the Government to halve the number of homeless people by 2010. The Legislative Council Select Committee on Housing Affordability in Tasmania also concluded that it is not acceptable for any Tasmanian to be homeless, but we recommended that the benchmark should be to ensure that no person is homeless by 2010. Minister, can you let this House know what your commitment to homeless people in Tasmania is and if you think that it is acceptable for the Government to provide shelter for only half of Tasmania's homeless people? If that is the case, what would you say to the other half?

**Ms THORP** - I thank the honourable member for his question. He is quite right and I think we would all agree that it is unacceptable in this day and age for anyone to be without shelter over their head. It is one of the most basic of human rights. I have often thought that you could ascertain the true value of a community by how it treats its young people, its elderly and people with disabilities. I just had the privilege to go the 10-year celebrations of Nexus which is close to Elwick, I think it is in the member for Derwent's electorate, at Granton. It is a wonderful institution that provides housing for about 36 people with disabilities.

To answer your question quite specifically, the benchmark is a good way to go, but I think what we should aim to do is make sure that everybody has shelter over heads at all times but you have to set yourself some kind of a goal towards that. As you quite rightly said, in March this year the Government began a bold agenda to address homelessness in Tasmania and it was one of the immediate references that was made to the newly established Social Inclusion Unit in the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The Government acted really quickly to get a benchmark figure for primary homelessness, or what some people call rough sleeping or sleeping rough, by 30 June 2008 and set a goal to halve primary homelessness by the end of 2010.

The Government established a working group comprising the Social Inclusion Unit, Housing Tasmania, the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the University of Tasmania and Shelter Tasmania to establish the benchmark. To do that they consulted with all emergency accommodation providers, shelter and SAAP services in Tasmania and all spheres of government. They commissioned the ABS State office to provide preliminary data on homelessness from the 2006 census and ran a SAAP survey to provide a picture of homelessness in 2008 from those working every day with homeless people. This working group found that the 2006 census is the most reliable and comprehensive data on homelessness that we have available to us, that the homeless population is in fact a fluid one and people who are homeless do not necessarily neatly fit into ABS-defined categories of primary, secondary or tertiary homelessness. Someone sleeping rough one night might be couch-surfing the next, for example.

**Mr Wilkinson** - Some people often can't find their way home on a Saturday night.

*Members laughing.*

**Ms THORP** - Whilst I know the honourable member is being flippant, there are people -

**Mr Dean** - The police normally accommodate them.

**Ms THORP** - Tasmania Police have an excellent reputation for assisting people who find themselves in those circumstances.

The bigger problem in Tasmania is the 50 per cent of our homeless people who are couch-surfing - that is, actually relying on friends and family so they are not on the streets. At any one given time you have a number of people who may be actually sleeping outside. A couple of nights later they might find an accommodating friend who will have them sleeping overnight for a couple of nights. That cannot last for very long though and so it is back out on the streets. That is what I mean by a fluid problem.

It is a problem that cannot be easily solved. It is a complex social issue that will take all Tasmanians, government, business and community sectors working together to end it, and that is what we are striving to do. With evidence-based policy-making led by the Social Inclusion Unit and targets to measure our progress, a benchmark is just the first step. The working group determined 450 as the benchmark figure for primary homelessness based on the preliminary 2006 census data provided by the ABS. The ABS has since advised the Government that the figure of 376 released by Chamberlain and Mackenzie in their 2006 Counting the Homeless Report in September this year is a much more accurate estimate of the number of people who were primary homeless in Tasmania on census night in 2006.

Rosanne Haggerty's report to the Government, Ending Homelessness in Tasmania, refers to the Government's goal to halve primary homelessness as ambitious and commends everyone who has made ending homelessness in Tasmania a priority. She advises, however, that ending homelessness is possible in Tasmania because of, and I quote:

'The keen sense of community that exists in Tasmania and the deeply felt ties that Tasmanians feel for each other ... It is this spirit of mutual concern, neighbourliness, and belief that a stable home is necessary to have a fair chance at a life of stability and contribution that can animate a ... whole-of-community response to homelessness in Tasmania.'

Federally, there is also a green paper to improve our national response to homelessness and we are currently waiting on the release of the Australian Government's

white paper, which is scheduled for this month, before developing the full Tasmanian plan.

**Mr Wilkinson** - Can we have the potted version of the answer, please, rather than the full volume?

**Ms THORP** - I did undertake, honourable members, to give fulsome responses but I will try to carve it down a bit.

There are many new initiatives looking at homelessness at the moment, to answer the honourable member for Elwick's question, like Common Ground and approaches to youth homelessness that go right across all the areas of my portfolio. We are also going to look to strengthen much of the existing good work that is already under way in Tasmania by Homeless Shelter and service providers.

**Ms Forrest** - How do you choose which ones are housed in that 50 per cent and which ones aren't?

**Ms THORP** - What we do is provide as many houses as possible, as many units and shelter options as possible in a period of time. It is not a matter of saying, 'You will and you won't'. The client who is there at the door at the time who needs the accommodation that is available will be the first one served in this instance. But I really do believe that by working together and focusing on early intervention and prevention of the complex needs and multiple disadvantages that are often faced by homeless people, homelessness is a problem that we can solve.

## HOMELESSNESS

[2.45 p.m.]

**Mr MARTIN** (Question) - I have a supplementary question. I think the honourable member for Western Tiers yesterday asked a question about how much of the \$60 million is allocated to meet that benchmark in this year's Budget and you agreed to come back with the figures. Do you have those figures yet? In addition, the more important question to me is: how many of those homeless people have received homes since the state of the State promise?

**Ms THORP** - I thank the honourable member for his question. The information that the honourable member for Western Tiers asked was how much of the \$60 million had been expended and the answer to that currently is around \$7 million. I am loath to put figures on things such as this because sometimes money is committed and not spent. The money is not necessarily all still available, if you like. When it comes to the actual numbers, I have come into this portfolio in a situation where there are several initiatives being looked at for homelessness. The one you mentioned with Highfield House would take up an extraordinary amount of that \$60 million, so I am asking for the department to provide me with a range of options other than the Highfield House model so that I can get

some idea of the unit price to house each of those people. I think you have to have a real balance here. Do you spend \$21 million on housing perhaps 40 people or do you look at a range of options to spend that same \$21 million to house a lot more? That is the position I am at at the moment. As to how many people are housed today who were not housed yesterday, that is an answer I will have to get you. I am happy to give you a full briefing on it. Some of these things are a lot more complex than a simple answer of dollar figures would cover.