

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into budget estimates 2009–10

Melbourne — 19 May 2009

Members

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Witnesses

Ms L. Neville, Minister for Community Services,
Ms F. Thorn, Secretary,
Mr A. Hall, Executive Director, Financial and Corporate Services,
Mr P. McDonald, Executive Director, Children, Youth and Families,
Mr A. Rogers, Executive Director, Disability Services, Department of Human Services; and
Mr J. MacIsaac, Executive Director, People and Communities, Department of Planning and
Community Development.

The CHAIR — I declare open the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing on the 2009–10 budget estimates for the portfolio of community services. On behalf of the committee I welcome Ms Lisa Neville, Minister for Community Services. I also welcome Ms Fran Thorn, secretary; Mr Alan Hall, executive director, financial and corporate services; Mr Paul McDonald, executive director, children, youth and families; and Mr Arthur Rogers, executive director, disability services, Department of Human Services; and Mr James MacIsaac, executive director, people and communities, Department of Planning and Community Development. Departmental officers, members of the public and the media are also welcome.

In accordance with the guidelines for public hearings, I remind members of the public that they cannot participate in the committee's proceedings. Only officers of the PAEC secretariat are to approach PAEC members. Departmental officers, as requested by the minister or her chief of staff, can approach the table during the hearing. Members of the media are also requested to observe the guidelines for filming or recording proceedings in the Legislative Council committee room.

All evidence taken by this committee is taken under the provisions of the Parliamentary Committees Act and is protected from judicial review. However, any comments made outside the precincts of the hearing are not protected by parliamentary privilege. There is no need for evidence to be sworn. All evidence given today is being recorded. Witnesses will be provided with proof versions of the transcript to be verified and returned within two working days of this hearing. In accordance with past practice, the transcripts and PowerPoint presentations will then be placed on the committee's website.

Following a presentation by the minister, committee members will ask questions relating to the budget estimates. Generally the procedure followed will be that relating to questions in the Legislative Assembly.

I ask that all mobile telephones be turned off. I might add that mobile telephones should not be used — I think there was an occasion yesterday, from what I am advised — to actually take photos. I remind people in the gallery that they should not be using mobile phones to take photos.

I now call on the minister to give a brief presentation of no more than 10 minutes on the more complex financial and performance information that relates to the budget estimates for the portfolio of community services.

Overheads shown.

Ms NEVILLE — Thank you, Chair. I want to take the committee through some of the key areas within the community services budget, looking at some of the achievements and some of the reform areas to date and going forward as well. I will focus on some particular areas. It is quite a broad-ranging portfolio, so I will not be able to go through all the areas of the portfolio in detail.

The first area is children, youth and families and out-of-home care. Over the last few years the government has been systematically reforming our child protection system, with a strong focus on prevention and early intervention, which has substantially contributed to the stabilisation of child abuse substantiations in Victoria. This has been backed by massive new investment of \$136 million, with substantiations falling by 7.2 per cent in Victoria, compared with a 143 per cent rise across Australia. The reforms, combined with strategic new investment, have resulted in lower growth and substantiated cases of child abuse again in 2007–08.

The rollout of our early intervention family services model, which is known as ChildFIRST, is contributing to the reduction in child abuse substantiations. I am pleased to advise that in February of this year we were able to complete the full rollout of the ChildFIRST sites, which now sees ChildFIRST being offered right across the state one year ahead of schedule. Demand levels and referrals for ChildFIRST are running at predicted levels of about 6000 referrals a year.

Over the last 12 months the government has focused significant attention on our out-of-home care system. The reforms that we have undertaken at the front end — that is, the reforms I have just spoken about — have contributed to reductions in substantiated abuse, but also reductions in the number of first-time entrants into the out-of-home care system. In fact, we are running at an eight-year low.

We have around 5800 children in care, compared with New South Wales which has 13 000. However, there are changes that are impacting on demand in this area. Children are now staying much longer in care, and that is for a number of reasons. There is better targeting, so that we are getting to the right families and the right children,

but also greater complexity of family needs that impacts on issues confronting children in care. This requires new ways of responding, continuing to focus on strategies to support families and kids to keep them out of care where we can, and better being able to respond to the complex needs of kids in care and improve their life outcomes. This is an issue that the government will tackle with the same innovative evidence-based reform that we did in relation to notifications and reports. The 2009 budget outcome is another step in our new approach to this important issue.

The budget invests \$160 million over four years. This includes around \$125 million to look at the issue of demand and quality in our out-of-home care system. This includes money to strengthen families, through family mentors providing intensive in-house support to families, particularly targeted at the 0–2 and the 13–16-year-old age group. There is \$89 million to reshape the care system, including funding to respond to predicted caregiver growth; funding for greater placement diversity, for example, things like recruiting up to 100 practitioners to provide intensive care in the home; and money to improve quality through things like therapeutic treatment services.

The budget also provides money to upgrade residential care facilities to provide more home-like environments; \$14 million over four years to expand the capacity of after-hours child protection services, expand coverage of our Streetwork Outreach Service and make improvements in the central after-hours assessment and bail placement service. The budget also provides \$10.45 million to expand our sexual assault services, ensuring that we can provide additional counselling for around 1330 children a year.

If I can move on to concessions, this year we have again increased our water and sewerage concession cap to ensure low-income families are able to manage the anticipated water price increases. This is \$42 million over four years to increase the cap from \$189.70 to \$216.60. This year we are also substantially increasing funding for our WaterWise program to assist low-income Victorians to reduce their water consumption with water conservation audits and appliances.

Moving on to disability, this government has continued to invest in and improve disability services in line with the goals of the 10-year state disability plan. Last year, we made the biggest ever single investment by a Victorian government in disability services, with an increase of \$233 million over four years.

As a result of this and previous commitments, we are making major progress on a number of fronts. We have seen a significant improvement in the system's capacity to address client need, as shown in the graph up on the slide, which shows the lowest levels of registered need for supported accommodation and community support since 2006.

The disability support register fell by 15 per cent in the period from June to December 2008 and has fallen by over 24 per cent since June 2006. We are providing greater choice and more self-directed supports for clients, and funding for this area has increased by 207 per cent since 1999–2000. And we have seen the closure of Kew Residential Services, seeing 475 clients move to more appropriate community accommodation in the community.

We are also continuing to invest in a viable disability services sector through price increases like those, most recently, in attendant care services, specific assistance to help NGOs to make the transition to more self-directed funding approaches as well as practical assistance around training and service quality.

As a result of these achievements the latest report on government services by the Productivity Commission report shows that Victoria has higher or comparable levels of access to key services such as supported accommodation, in-home support to live in the community and respite services.

This slide shows the priorities over the next 12 months, which I will just skip over, and I will then show how the budget is going to meet some of those priorities.

This budget builds on the commitment we made last year and in previous years to improve disability services. It provides an additional \$86.9 million over four years, which is a 9.6 per cent increase in funding for disability services from the 2008–09 period, and includes \$9 million in the children and early childhood portfolio for early childhood intervention services. This investment represents an increase in the disability services budget of 125 per cent since 1999–00, including the 207 per cent increase in the individual support budget and the 83 per cent increase in the budget for supported accommodation.

This budget builds new service capacity with an additional almost \$30 million over four years to continue to expand access for people with a disability to individual and flexible support in the community. The Transition to Employment program is provided with new funding of \$16.7 million over four years to support and enhance a service to assist more young people with a disability who are leaving school to find employment or access further education.

The budget also supports further industry reform, with \$12.5 million to assist community service organisations to improve their capacity to undertake strategic and business planning and move to more self-directed approaches. There is also \$4 million which was provided in 2008–09 to respond to cost pressures.

The budget also delivers on other major programs, with \$10 million in 2008–09 for stage 1 of the My Future My Choice program, and this budget provides an additional \$13.8 million to develop 13 purpose-built facilities for 58 young people living in or at risk of entering residential aged care.

The budget also provides an additional \$5 million over three years to establish community-based, co-located facilities where disability supports are integrated with other community services.

Further investment in services will also flow from additional funding of \$21.6 million under the National Disability Agreement. This will assist in providing additional individual support and respite services, although it is true to say that Victoria still carries the lion's share of disability funding, providing over 80 per cent of our total resources. The combination of last year's money, this year's money and also the National Disability Agreement money will see an additional \$77 million in 2009–10 alone.

This year we have also invested to support the implementation of the autism state plan. The state plan was a result of extensive consultation with families of children with autism and a partnership approach with Autism Victoria. The autism state plan will be released very shortly. The budget commences funding for a number of critical areas that families had identified with us as requiring urgent attention. There will be additional money for our mental health services to provide better diagnosis and support among children and adolescents with autism.

There is also money in education to improve the support for preschool children and young people of school age who have autism and to provide staff development opportunities. This, of course, builds on our change in government policy last year which acknowledged that autism spectrum disorder is a neurological impairment under the Disability Act, and \$2.75 million was provided at the time to help families and carers to access information, peer support groups and parent and carer support groups and to help them plan and provide case management for their children with autism.

Briefly on bushfire recovery, the government has almost \$1 billion committed over the next couple of years in relation to bushfire recovery. In relation to the Department of Human Services it is around \$75 million, which is going to critical services like the case management service, community development officers and the ongoing role of community support hubs, which are replacing recovery centres. We are also playing a role in the distribution of the bushfire appeal funds, and just over \$60 million has been paid out of that fund to date.

Mr WELLS — But that surely is not in total. That amount would have been updated, surely. If the total amount paid is \$60 million — there would be more than that paid out of the bushfire fund, surely?

Ms NEVILLE — About \$3 million is paid every day; about 150 grants are paid out each day. The big grants out of the bushfire appeal fund are, firstly, the \$50 000 grant, which is for contents and also for rebuilding; and then there is the needs grant. When people apply they get the immediate \$15 000 for the contents. They are then required, as required by the bushfire appeal fund, to provide conformation that they have received financial advice before the remaining \$35 000, or the needs-based money, is paid out.

The CHAIR — We will take up the issues in questioning. The minister, to finalise her presentation.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Are you suggesting there is still around \$290 million —

The CHAIR — Can we finalise the presentation first and get the details later?

Ms NEVILLE — I will go through it in detail, if you like, during questions.

The CHAIR — That would be great.

Ms NEVILLE — I will not talk about this, Chair — I am just conscious of the time — but in my portfolio there is also youth justice and family violence.

The CHAIR — Both of which are actually quite important issues. Minister, I would like to begin by asking you, as I have asked other ministers, what federal funding in grants, both output and assets, will your portfolio department and various agencies receive in the budget? Can the department provide the committee with a list and description of these grants going forward? What accountability mechanisms, both upwards and downwards, are there in respect of these grants?

Ms NEVILLE — As you know, last year COAG agreed to a number of funding agreements — both national partnership agreements and SPP agreements — across a number of areas in health, schools, disability and affordable housing. I will not go into full detail — I will provide the list — but I will touch on each of the agreements under my portfolio areas.

There are four principal agreements with the commonwealth. In mental health there is the federal funding that is received as part of the national health care agreement, which comes into effect on 1 July. We also receive funding under the national perinatal depression initiative, which is a jointly funded program between the state and the commonwealth. We also receive funding under the COAG national action plan on mental health. The mental health output group also receives funding from the Department of Veterans' Affairs for services provided to DVA clients, and that is on a contractual basis between DHS and DVA.

The drug outputs group receives federal funding under the public health outcome funding agreement and illicit drug diversion initiative. This is particularly targeted at those in the justice system or those being released from the justice system with drug and alcohol problems. Under disability services we receive funding through the new national disability agreement and the associated disability specific purpose payment which came into effect on 1 January this year.

In 2009–10 commonwealth funding to Victoria through the disability SPP will be \$208.2 million, which incorporates the previous funding provided under the CSTDA of over \$148 million. There are also other bilateral agreements with the commonwealth in the area of disability, disability assistance package respite, targeted support and the young people in nursing homes program. That will see an increase of about \$15.5 million for the disability assistance package in this year. Around 16 per cent of the total disability budget is through some sort of commonwealth agreement. There is also an agreement in aged care under the national partnership of aged care assessment services. There are federal grants, and this year it will be about \$18.6 million. Under the national partnership for home and community care, federal grants in 2009–10 will be around \$282 million, an increase of 6.8 per cent from last year.

The accountability agreements apply across government, as well as some specific reporting measures that exist within each of those agreements. The broader accountability and performance measures are set out in this intergovernmental agreement on federal financial relations. There is also accountability for expenditure of national SPP which will apply to disability services under schedule D of the IGA. That requires us to spend the money within disability services, but does not require us to spend on particular things, although we do need to report against particular outcome measures. Also, each state and territory treasurer provides a report to the Ministerial Council for Federal Financial Relations within six months of every financial year.

The CHAIR — We are also interested in accountability downwards for the federal money as it is distributed to organisations et cetera, so I put that one on notice. Just to follow up on that one, I know there has been a change to the federal grants and a lot of them have been rolled up into a smaller number now. You mentioned quite a few there; have some of these been rolled up in the new process under COAG into a smaller number of programs?

Ms NEVILLE — All of these remain as separate agreements.

The CHAIR — So there is no movement on that to change that in the future through the ministerial council?

Ms NEVILLE — There is some discussion around some at the aged care end, but that is still to be resolved by COAG.

The CHAIR — Thank you, Minister.

Mr WELLS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 109, in regard to the pricing review. The government commissioned PricewaterhouseCoopers to review cost drivers and prices for out-of-home disability services, and it reportedly stated that the sector is currently underfunded by more than \$50 million. As minister, can you guarantee that disability organisations in this state will not fail financially as a result of withholding and failing to implement your own report into funding of the non-government disability services?

How do you justify presiding over the decline in the disability sector, closure of programs and closure of possible organisations? I am wondering if you could provide the report to the committee and confirm that the report did say there was an underfunding of \$50 million.

The CHAIR — The minister, to answer insofar as the question relates to the forward estimates.

Ms NEVILLE — The government acknowledges how important it is to have a sustainable disability services sector. We are moving to a more individual approach, but within that we need a disability services sector to continue to provide the high quality services that it does to so many people in our community and their families. That is why we have put in place a number of key measures to assist in maintaining their sustainability.

Firstly, we have undertaken two major price reviews. In 2008–09 agencies providing in-home disability services were provided with \$9 million in funding for a price increase for attendant care services. This funding was provided as a result of the independent consultant's report, which demonstrated that the cost of delivering in-home care was above what we had previously been paying. In 2008–09, as the member of the committee has mentioned, the department engaged PricewaterhouseCoopers to undertake a review of the out-of-home service prices. The report is being considered by the department in conjunction with other information on price issues which has recently been provided by a group of community service organisations. We are continuing to discuss these issues with the sector. However, in this budget there is an additional \$4 million to be delivered in 2008–09 specifically to assist agencies in addressing cost pressures, upgrading infrastructure and developing — —

Mr WELLS — Do you mean 2009–10?

Ms NEVILLE — It is yet to be delivered. They will be provided with the money in the 2008–09 period. Secondly, we are putting in place a range of industry assistance with the provision of additional \$3 million in this budget, or \$12.48 million over four years, to assist day services to transition to more flexible individualised funding models.

They are concerned about the cost of that, and this additional funding will assist them, particularly around some of the information technology development. The funding builds on the money that we provided last year — another \$3 million to assist them in moving to those self-directed approaches — and we provided money to assist the sector to upgrade amenities and accommodation standards.

We are also working with the sector on a number of things around industry plans, industry development and training initiatives, and we are also developing a workforce strategy with the sector given that the workforce is a critical component of delivering our disability services. Finally, we are providing annual price indexation to service providers through the department service agreement system. The department will index agency prices at 3.14 per cent over the three years to 2011–12 to assist agencies to meet the cost pressures and continue to deliver quality services. On top of that, \$2 million each year will be provided to community service organisations to enhance their service capacity. This indexation has been welcomed across the community sector organisations.

Mr WELLS — So, can you confirm that the report — —

The CHAIR (to Mr Wells) — Can you ask your question through the Chair, please?

Mr WELLS — Through the Chair.

The CHAIR — Mr Wells?

Mr WELLS — Minister, the two parts of the question are: will you release the report to the committee, and can you confirm that the underfunding was \$50 million through the PricewaterhouseCoopers report?

Ms NEVILLE — As I indicated in the answer firstly, there is another report and other information that has been provided by disability organisations to the department. It has other information that goes to the question of price, and we are working with the sector both about that information as well as the information from PricewaterhouseCoopers. My discussions with the sector have been focused on the fact that it is their right for us to be talking together about both those reports before we do anything further with that PricewaterhouseCoopers report.

It is information that the community service disability organisations provided. It is their information and they are entitled to work with us on that information first. Secondly, can I just say that there is a range of information in that document and there is no consistent information that would suggest that there is a price that could easily be set for a range of services, and we need to continue to work that through. Some of the cost pressure issues —

Mr WELLS — You will not deny there is underfunding of \$50 million?

The CHAIR — Thank you, Mr Wells. The minister to answer? Are you finished, Minister?

Ms NEVILLE — Yes.

Mr WELLS — But what about denying the \$50 million underfunding?

The CHAIR — I think the minister has given an answer to that twice now.

Ms MUNT — Minister, in your opening presentation, you touched on bushfire recovery. On page 284 of budget paper 3, under the heading ‘2009 Victorian Bushfire Response and Recovery’, there is a range of programs and initiatives detailed under the Department of Human Services. Could you just expand on how the government’s response has actually been implemented in bushfire-affected areas?

Ms NEVILLE — I think the events of 7 February will remain with us for a very long time. I think the loss of lives, families and communities has touched all Victorians and all Australians and many across the world. I think it is something that we have never before seen or lived through, and unfortunately I think we are reminded regularly of the tragic statistics and all the people who sit behind those tragic statistics.

After the fires the efforts of DHS were focused on how we could support individuals and communities to recover, and help them to rebuild their lives. That has involved immediate direct relief in the short term but also planning and resourcing for the longer term assistance. I have had the opportunity to visit many of the bushfire-affected areas, both immediately after but also since that time. It is hard not to be affected by all that we have seen and all that the survivors have gone through, but I think set against this tragedy has been enormous community spirit. I think that gives us confidence that we can assist people to rebuild their lives.

As I said, the budget provides almost \$1 billion over five years for various services in infrastructure as part of the government’s response to bushfires. Of this, \$106 million has been allocated to the Department of Human Services to focus on emergency relief and services that provide the longer term support that families will need. Money has been allocated for grants to individuals and for housing support, health and wellbeing programs, and coordination of regional response and recovery activities.

Once the immediate threat had passed, we took on the lead role in the recovery process. From the initial emergency response through to developing and implementing new and longer term recovery plans, the Department of Human Services has been working across a broad range of areas, whether it has been providing emergency shelter and accommodation, material aid, financial assistance, public health information, as well as coordinating medical services and psychological assistance — they were the initial priorities of the department in the immediate aftermath of 7 February. This work has been long and demanding, and at its height we had over 600 departmental staff who worked on immediate relief responses, mainly indirect relief and recovery efforts. Approximately 200 staff remain actively involved.

Given the scale of the event, we established for the first time in Victoria a case management service. It is a joint initiative with the commonwealth government. It became operational within a week of the fires and is providing

one-on-one support for families. It has been a massive task. We have 72 agencies which are involved. We have nearly 400 case managers assisting just over 4000 families and individuals, and the budget has allocated \$70 million over the next two years to continue to offer that support.

The needs of registered families vary from simple requests to very long-term and complex issues, and case managers are responding to those. In further recognition of the long-term recovery efforts that we need to be involved in, we have moved from recovery centres into what are now called community hubs in the 10 most affected communities. The hubs will continue to provide services that the communities need. They will vary according to the individual community needs, but will for example have Centrelink, other financial advice, DHS, the Victorian Bushfire Reconstruction and Recovery Authority, and advice on rebuilding and building permit processes.

We have employed dedicated community service hub captains who will be playing advocate in local communities to ensure that we can resolve issues and problems, not only for individuals but for communities as a whole. Of course, as we would always do after a disaster of this sort, we have employed community development officers across communities. We have also been involved in the direct financial support through the emergency grants. You can see the amount we have paid out in emergency grants — \$12.9 million. We were also involved in the psychosocial response, immediately with funding for counsellors and specialist mental health teams were involved. Back in March we released *Renew — A Psychosocial Response to Bushfires*, which is providing additional support to communities and individuals who are struggling with trauma in the aftermath of the events of 7 February.

It is very important that we continue these efforts. This will be a long-term effort for the Department of Human Services, but also for the government as a whole. As people physically rebuild, our role is to assist them in that process by helping them to emotionally rebuild their lives.

Dr SYKES — Minister, I would like to follow up on the bushfire recovery program. The \$353 million — we are talking the Red Cross-managed appeal?

Ms NEVILLE — Yes.

Dr SYKES — How much of that money has actually been announced as having been allocated — \$250 million, or something like that?

Ms NEVILLE — Yes, over \$200 million has been committed, and pretty much each week the appeal fund is announcing new grants. The Winter Needs Grant was announced last week.

Dr SYKES — You have got \$353 million in total donations received, over \$200 million announced as committed and \$60 million delivered. I think you would be aware that, certainly to me as a local member, there are lots of expressions of frustration and angst about the gap between announcement and delivery. One of the causes of frustration is that people have to provide their personal details repeatedly for different assistance. I am wondering whether you have got some strategy in place to address this lag phase, in particular a simple concept like one central database through which data can be accessed for all grant applications.

Secondly, as you are aware, there has been a major concern about certain groups falling through the cracks in terms of available assistance measures. In particular in relation to the Red Cross-type public appeal money there has been a problem with making that money available to people whose property is owned in a business entity, particularly farmers. If you had one central database, would you be proactive and use your data to identify clients' needs to develop modified assistance measures? Keeping in mind this is public donation, at an arm's length from government. Would you then be contacting clients who had a need and saying, 'We have now addressed your need, and we encourage you to apply for such and such a grant'? In other words, there is a lag phase, there is angst and frustration. What are you doing about fast tracking that and helping those people who, as you know, are still very, very stressed?

The CHAIR — A rather long question over there!

Dr SYKES — It is a matter of providing the background.

Ms NEVILLE — I think I have got it down.

The CHAIR — You've got that?

Ms NEVILLE — I think I have got it. I just want to be clear that the Department of Human Services does not set the criteria for the grants. We administer the grants according to the criteria and the eligibility established by the Appeal Fund. That is where our role comes in. To explain the process for the large grants, as I have said before, people might be entitled to the rebuilding grant, which is \$50 000, and some might be entitled to the additional needs-based grant — for disability or whatever it might be.

If we take the \$50 000 grant, which is broken into two figures; one is for contents and one is for rebuilding. When people apply, one of the criteria set by the fund is that people are required to get financial advice. It is a large amount of money and advice is needed on how to manage that money. The banks, National Australia Bank for example, are offering free advice. The advice has been established, but that was one of the criteria.

What we have been doing with the bushfire appeal fund is that for the first \$15 000 people applied and that was paid out straightaway. Basically people are assessed and the money is committed. We then have to wait until that financial advice information comes through. We do not see the financial advice; we just need proof that financial advice has been sought. Once that comes in it is paid out. There is a lag time in there, but that is one of the criteria we are required to follow. As I said, it varies a bit but we pay out \$3 million to \$5 million a day as those grants come in — —

Dr SYKES — Is that increasing exponentially, or is it a constant line?

Ms NEVILLE — Yes, it is absolutely going up.

The CHAIR — There is a graph for you.

Ms NEVILLE — See you can see it there.

Dr SYKES — That is quite exponential.

Ms NEVILLE — It is going up quite substantially. Basically people put in an application with all the details, the financial advice and all of that, and the grants are paid at the most within three days. It is turned around very quickly.

On the issue of how we make it as easy as possible, because this is certainly one of the issues that people confront, having to fill in forms. Firstly, there is the case manager's role in trying to assist people in doing that. Secondly, if we get application forms that do not contain all the information, we will do everything we can before we have to ring that person to try to get the information. We might look back through the database, we might look at a form for another grant application, we might ring the case manager — whatever we can do to minimise the need to ring a person and say, 'You have left a gap on your application form'.

Our first step is to do that. Secondly, if in the processing of that grant we notice that somebody has not applied for another grant, we will pay that grant as well. So they have this application form and clearly they are eligible for another grant, we will notify them to say, 'We are also paying this grant'. Case managers also have the ability to check on their individual client on the database and say, 'Okay, you have applied for X, Y and Z. This is what's being paid for you. You haven't applied for this, so we're going to put in an application for that'.

We are trying to make it as simple as possible. In the emergency relief stage, people were paid without IDs, they were paid without information. It was critical we got that money out to people as quickly as possible, and they were paid on the spot. Obviously the bigger the grant, we need to just make sure they are going to the right people and we are trying to make that as simple as possible whilst ensuring that the money is going to the right people.

Dr SYKES — Just a couple of clarifications.

The CHAIR — Very quickly. You can always ask another question later.

Dr SYKES — Chair, we have had it put to us on a number of occasions that this is a very significant event in the history of Victoria.

The CHAIR — I understand that.

Dr SYKES — The recovery phase is extremely significant. I have a lot of people contacting me, raising their concerns. I would like to get it very clear in my head so that I can give them clear feedback, and I have opportunity to get that from the minister.

Minister, in relation to these larger grants, the turnaround time from submission to payment is in the order of three days?

Ms NEVILLE — If all the documentation is there.

Dr SYKES — And in terms of the data management, are people still being required to fill out different grant forms or do you have the central database that you can look at, doing a lot of the form completion for them and they have to fill in only two or three blanks?

Ms NEVILLE — Case managers will work with people to fill in forms. As I said, if somebody has a plight, so we have somebody's information and we realise they have not applied for everything they can, we do not require them to fill out forms. We will pay that money. If we have their information, we will just pay out that money — notify them, but pay out the money.

Dr SYKES — One last clarification. Survivors are given a one-on-one case management service, but one case manager can look after up to 7 or 10?

Ms NEVILLE — That is right. It is based on a disaster model. The way that we try and do it is we have what are known as inactive cases, where people say 'We don't need a case manager any more', but they are still allocated to a case manager and they get rung regularly. Then people will have around 10 active cases.

Dr SYKES — Are you about to rotate off the case managers? Is the group that has been employed finishing up and is another group about to be employed or are you rolling over the contracts or what?

Ms NEVILLE — We are rolling over the contracts. So the only changes will be that Centrelink staff came in for a period of six months and we are working to replace those, but the intention is to try and have consistent ongoing case managers.

Dr SYKES — That was a concern out there that it looked like one group finishing and 'Oh, my God, we're going to have to go through this with another person'.

Ms NEVILLE — No.

Dr SYKES — Thank you.

Mr NOONAN — Minister, I refer to budget paper 3, pages 38 and 39 under 'Supporting people with a disability'. One of the line items in this budget under the enhanced facilities is \$14 million for 13 new purpose-built houses to enable the relocation of young people with high-care needs from residential aged-care services to more age-appropriate facilities. I wonder whether you can advise on the progress of this initiative and any further details that relate to the forward estimates period?

Ms NEVILLE — As I said earlier, this is a COAG bilateral agreement that we have with the commonwealth, known here in Victoria as My Future My Choice, and stage 1 commenced on 1 July 2006. The aim of the initiative is reduce the number of young people living in a residential aged-care facility by either assisting some to move out or preventing others actually having to enter an aged-care facility in the first place.

Over 215 people aged less than 50 living in residential aged care participated in individual planning and assessment that identified what their preference was: was it to move out of the residential aged-care facility into an alternative living arrangement, remain in the residential aged-care facility with enhanced disability support? About 70 per cent of participants indicated that they wanted to move out of the residential aged care.

In addition we have been working with young people and their families and assisting them through individual support packages and other accommodation options other than that provided under My Future My Choice. The figures are encouraging, so in July of 2006 we had about 221 younger people living a residential aged-care

facility; in April of this year that had reduced to 187. That will continue to reduce. This is both those who are currently there as well as preventing new people coming in.

Today I will also announce that land has been secured to build three facilities. There is a \$1.5 million house in Altona for six young people, which will be managed by Yooralla; a \$1.3 million house in Frankston, again for six people, and again that is state and commonwealth money; and a \$1.2 million house in Geelong for five young people, to be managed by Scope. I will also be announcing the providers who will deliver 10 new services as part of stage 2. I will be announcing that today.

These innovative new purpose-built accommodation services are being established to provide more suitable options for those who seek alternative living arrangements. In 2007–08 the Victorian government allocated \$10 million in capital funding to assist in the establishment of these facilities, and that enabled the commencement of stage 1, which is going to provide places for 46 young people.

The first of those services opened in Balwyn in February 2008 — I think the Chair was there — allowing six people with an acquired brain injury to move out of residential aged care. I think you would agree, Chair, that the young people and their families were pretty excited about the move, and it certainly is making a real difference in their quality of life.

In this budget we have announced a further \$13.8 million to facilitate stage 2 of the service development which will deliver supported accommodation options for 58 people, and a number of these services will be in rural and regional Victoria. So in total 104 new accommodation places are scheduled to be completed, including those I have mentioned. There are the 6 places in Balwyn and 18 new places during 2009–10, and I have mentioned a couple of those.

There is construction about to commence also in Alphington and Glen Waverley; there is also a new house in design work in Grovedale. There will also be another 70 new places in 2010–11 which will be in Noble Park, Geelong, Horsham, McKinnon, Altona and Frankston — which I mentioned — Ballarat, Shepparton and Bayswater. The new houses are either in the planning or design phases. We are currently in the process of sourcing land in the western suburbs, northern suburbs, Wodonga, Bendigo, Berwick, Bairnsdale and Moe.

On top of this a total of 19 younger people have been assisted to exit residential aged care. They have either returned home with additional supports through the individual support packages or exited to supported accommodation options. To date 44 younger people have been diverted from entering aged care through the provision of the individual support packages.

Over 100 younger people who remain in aged care, either by choice or because they are waiting for an appropriate option to become available, are receiving support packages, aids and equipment to enhance their quality of life. The support packages, for example, are used to ensure they can access the local community. It might be that community buses are used, they can go home on weekends or they are assisted in maintaining family and social relationships. It might be particular equipment in their rooms that make them able to live more independently in their aged-care facility, or it might be new wheelchairs.

All of those sorts of things are improving the lives of those young people who remain in residential aged care. I think this is one of the really critical initiatives that we have at the moment with the commonwealth government. It is already making a real difference to young people who are required to be in some form of supported accommodation. I think over the next two years we will see significant shifts in the numbers of young people in residential aged care.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, I would like to ask you about indexation and community services. Before you put those slides up on bushfires, can you just confirm that the 393 case managers is the number going forward and that that level will be maintained?

Ms NEVILLE — We are trying to do some planning on that at the moment, because it is a bit hard to predict. Not everybody will require a case manager for the whole two-year period. At the moment we are looking at the issues coming through and the needs of families, and trying to make an assessment based on that. We have committed to continuing to provide over the two years case managers for those families who need it.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — You said in your presentation that you have agreed to indexation of 3.14 per cent and that that was welcomed by the sector. I know that in the lead-up to the announcement in the budget the National Disability Services, which at that time was expecting 3.34 per cent, issued a statement. NDS asserts that:

... the disability sector is unable to continue to survive on price indexation of 3.34 per cent in the context of a history of underfunding, inadequate price indexation and productivity cuts.

Over recent years disability organisations have absorbed countless new regulatory requirements. It went on to say that NDS has voiced strong concern about the approach of the government which did not allow for adequate consultation with the sector. NDS also referred to the Allen Consulting Group's report, which forecast a requirement of 4.2 per cent indexation to maintain service levels. Given that you have come in lower at 3.14, and as NDS said, a lot of organisations have additional regulatory requirements upon them, how do you expect service providers to maintain service levels with an inadequate level of indexation?

Ms NEVILLE — I will just review the process for the NGO pricing indexation process. Firstly, it was this government that established the three-year funding agreements. It was something that the community sector always wanted — to have certainty going forward around their funding and to have price indexation certainty.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Going from the inquiry to this committee; it happened in 2001.

Ms NEVILLE — We did that back in 2003. We have been in the process of negotiations. There has been a price index working group which has contained or involved all of the key people of organisations — VCOSS, National Disability Services, the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare, VICSERV and Jesuit Social Services. They have all been involved, working in partnership with us to resolve the issue of price indexation.

Can I say that the Victorian Council of Social Service publicly stated how pleased it was with the outcome in relation to price indexation. In fact, overwhelmingly, all members of that working group were very pleased about the outcome in the context of the downturn in the economic cycle.

If you look at how indexation is set, it is a mix of both wages and also CPI. There is a formula that we use and that we have used in all of our funding agreements with the community services organisations. Based on the economic conditions and projections going forward, the indexation is one that community services organisations recognise will provide a really critical role in ensuring their sustainability going forward. And 3.14 per cent is an improvement on the last indexation and is well and truly able to meet the expected CPI costs and wages costs going forward.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — What about the increased regulatory burden for disability agencies?

Ms NEVILLE — As I have said already in my presentation, this year we have provided — which we did last year as well — another \$3 million to assist disability organisations to move towards more self-directed approaches. Certainly our focus rightly — absolutely rightly — in the area of disability is on ensuring that our system is focused on the needs of the individual and their families, not on the organisations. But in that context we need to make sure our organisations are also sustainable. So we are providing additional money for them to assist them with information technology and to assist them with regulatory burdens. We have got \$4 million to assist with cost pressures around transport issues — all of those things. That is about making the sector sustainable whilst ensuring that our primary driver in all of this is delivering the services that families and carers — families and people with a disability — want and choose.

That is what individual support packages are about. That is what direct payments are all about. It is a challenge, and that is why we are working with the sector, providing them with the resources, working with them to actually shift the way that they operate in order to meet the needs of people with a disability.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Given the government's own wage forecast came in at 3.75 per cent of the budget, why have you agreed on indexation of 3.14 per cent — substantially below the government's own wage forecast?

Ms NEVILLE — The government wages policy is 3.25.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — The wages forecast is 3.75.

Ms NEVILLE — The wages policy going forward is actually 2.5, but obviously what the budget figures show is the play-out of EBAs that have been agreed to prior to the new wages policy.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — The Treasury estimate for the Victorian economy is 3.75 per cent for wages growth, but you are saying your indexation is only going to be 3.14?

Ms NEVILLE — Except the indexation is not a formula that says ‘wages policy’. It has proportions that take account of wage increases and it has a proportion that takes account of CPI, so it is 85 per cent of wages and the rest is on CPI — —

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — It would be heavily weighted on wages, though, wouldn’t it?

Ms NEVILLE — So based on that formula, and if you look at wages policy and if you look at CPI, the figure of 3.14 going forward is a good outcome, and the community service organisations have agreed it is a good outcome. They sat at the table with us. It is a partnership arrangement of reaching a sustainable price indexation to support the sector going forward in the delivery of the services that they provides.

Ms HUPPERT — Minister, I want to refer you to page 40 of budget paper 3, which refers to the new funding which is being provided for additional services for children who have been removed from the care of their parents due to abuse or neglect and placed in out-of-home care. Could you please outline for the committee some details of this funding and what the new services will provide in the forward estimates period?

Ms NEVILLE — As I spoke about in my presentation, we have been undertaking substantial reform and investment in our child protection and family services areas. We have had new legislation and new initiatives; we have really targeted the front end of our system. The results of that have been substantial, with the reduction in substantiated abuse. But in addition to that, the results of that investment have also seen us as being at an eight-year low for the number of children who are entering our care system for the first time. However, there are demand pressures, and that is what this budget is all about — demand and quality pressures.

The budget allocates all up \$160 million in this area, and of this \$134 million is focused on our out-of-home care system, or what I would call the back end of the system. Our focus is on supporting families through intensive support, to try to drive down demand, to try to ensure that those children who can live at home safely with the extra support are provided with that, and that is particularly targeted at the 0 to 2 and the 13 to 16-year-olds. Our focus is also on how we improve the quality of care for those children who cannot live safely at home. It is not just about new funding but is signalling a new direction in out-of-home care, which we have developed with our partners in the community service organisations.

The priority actions, just to go over those again: \$19 million, which is about piloting the family mentor system, which is intensive in-home support for those families who might be at risk of a child entering our out-of-home care service; we have \$23 million to recruit up to 100 practitioners over the next four years to provide specialist care to kids with particular challenging behaviours who might benefit from that; we have \$47 million over four years to redesign our care system to deliver greater placement options and particularly to meet the diverse needs of adolescents; we have \$18.9 million over four years to secure more foster and kinship care placements for children removed from their families; \$13.9 million will be provided over the next four years to improve the funding to community service organisations who provide general residential care; we have \$10 million to upgrade residential care units, for which we want to draw on new building designs to deliver more homelike environments in our residential care services; \$1.3 million over three years for therapeutic treatment services to help children recover from trauma and past experiences, and that builds on our unique service which is called Take Two, which is providing therapeutic and mental health support services targeted particularly at children in the out-of-home care system; and \$1.2 million to organise better access to positive activities and community support for young people in residential care. We want to ensure that young people in residential care are linked in to sporting groups — are able to participate in other forms of activity outside residential care. There is also support to ensure Aboriginal children receive culturally appropriate care services.

Additional funding on top of this for sexual assault counselling services for children and a boost to the capacity of our after-hours child protection emergency crisis response telephone service will also help address the needs

of very vulnerable young people in care who are involved in risky behaviours such as street-based sex and drug exploitation.

These reform directions build on a number of key initiatives that we have already put in place to strengthen our care system: more support for carers through our statewide foster care training; increased reimbursements to carers to assist with meeting the costs of caring for children; the implementation of a new service model to support kinship carers; enhanced flexibility and capability of our care placements; the expansion of one-on-one placements; as I mentioned before, our Take Two service; and the development of the new model of therapeutic residential care, which is known as Hurstbridge Farm.

We also have a new leaving care support service for children who leave care at 18 years, to help them transition either into employment, further education or into other housing options, and also funding which has been provided through the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare to work on a recruitment campaign to attract more foster carers to the system.

This is very much delivering not just new investment but also looking at ways of doing this differently, and we will be doing that in conjunction with the community sector, who are very much partners with us in the delivery of child protection and family services here in Victoria.

Ms PENNICUIK — Just a quick follow-up from Mr Noonan's question about how many young people are still in aged-care facilities and the plan to alleviate this. My question is more a global-type question. Given the economic outlook and the expected increase in the incidence of financial and social stress in the community — and you mentioned the provision of financial counselling in your bushfire presentation — is there any plan to look at providing financial counselling services for people who are coming under stress, to prevent them from getting right into the problems of housing, mental health and other community service provision that they may wish to undertake?

Ms NEVILLE — Chair, financial counselling does not actually fall under my area of responsibility. I think it sits with the Minister for Consumer Affairs in the Department of Justice. I am just not able to answer the question on behalf of the minister. The sort of services that sit within my portfolio, including concessions and mental health support, all of those services absolutely go to assisting particularly vulnerable and low-income families and individuals in our community.

Ms PENNICUIK — Can you answer the first question?

Ms NEVILLE — Of how many? Yes. At the moment we have 186, I think, if my memory is right — it is 187 at the moment.

The CHAIR — Close.

Ms NEVILLE — It is 187, and as I said we have 104 new places coming on board. Of those 187 who remain in residential aged care not all those people wanted to move out. We spoke to 215 out of 221 — not everyone spoke to us, but we got pretty close. Of those, 70 per cent said they wanted to move out of residential aged-care facilities. At the same time as you are managing that you are also trying to prevent people from coming in, and the other part of the program has been about doing better work earlier on with families and young people to ensure they do not actually end up in residential aged care in the first place.

Ms PENNICUIK — What is the target time for achieving 100 per cent of that 70 per cent?

Ms NEVILLE — I think the 104 is up to the end of 2012.

Mr SCOTT — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 286 and Table A.1, which has the 'Enhancing Disability Services and Outcomes' heading. Can you tell us what investment in the 2009–10 budget will be delivered for people with a disability? Previously, Mr Wells asked about what organisations are receiving. I am interested in what will be delivered for people with a disability, in terms of the budget.

Ms NEVILLE — As I mentioned earlier, last year we had the biggest ever single investment in disability services, which equated to \$233 million over four years. This budget builds on that, with an additional \$86.9 million over four years, which includes \$9 million which sits in the department of education and it is

targeted at early childhood intervention services for children with a disability. The disability services budget is increasing in 2009–10 by \$112 million, or a 9.6 per cent increase all up.

Combined with last year's increase, the disability services budget has increased by more than 20 per cent in two years. The combined effect of these budgets has been to increase the funding available for disability services by over \$77 million, and that includes \$21.5 million that sits under the National Disability Agreement. This gives Victoria a total disability services budget of almost \$1.3 billion, an increase since 1999 of 125 per cent.

For people with a disability, the 2009–10 budget will deliver almost \$30 million to expand our individual support, making more individual support packages available and delivering about another 179 of those with this year's budget over the next four years. These individual support packages are really critical. They provide flexible support. They are about identifying individual needs around respite and around other supports that they might need in order to be able to live more independently in the community.

There is \$16.7 million over four years for the Transition to Employment program. This assists young people, particularly school leavers who have a disability, to be able either to access employment or to access further education. This is a really critical component. We want to make sure that if we get our planning right and we get the supports right young people have the best opportunities for full participation in our community.

We also have capital funding which I have just been speaking about, which is the \$13.8 million over four years to deliver the 58 new accommodation places, to build the purpose-built community accommodation options for those who are living in residential aged care. There is also capital funding of \$5 million over three years to establish community-based co-located facilities where disability supports are integrated with other community services. This again all goes to the issue of trying to ensure that people with a disability have equal opportunities and rights to participate in our community.

The development is focused on three different service models: co-location with existing providers, establishment of support and resource sites for people with a disability within key activity centres in local communities, and also developing local community infrastructure to encourage the participation of people with a disability in community activities. In addition, through the Office for Disability in DPCD, funding of \$7.2 million is provided for the ongoing work in raising community awareness and helping to change community attitudes.

Rolling out this year we continue our disability action plans which are focused on ensuring that within the public sector but also in community organisations that our buildings and our workplaces are as accessible as possible. We will see an additional 150 nominated public and community organisations go through the process of disability action plans.

These budget investments continue to ensure that our goals around a self-directed approach for people with a disability can continue to be met. We are determined that any new investments are about providing flexible services and supports and ensuring that people can have a real choice about living as independently as possible in our community, and changing community attitudes about people with a disability and their ability to participate in community activities.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — In respect of budget paper 3, pages 110 and 111, which relate to residential accommodation support, in terms of the forward estimates there is a moderate increase in the total output costs and I note the figures. I just want some explanation about the additional commonwealth funding and how that is reflected in the increases that are there, and in particular about some of the concerns that have been put forward about what appears to be a two-tiered system where the non-government sector appears to be funded out of this total output cost. Can you clarify for us whether there is a continuation of this two-tiered system?

It appears the non-government disability sector is underfunded. It is expected to deliver the same type and quality of service as the DHS services but to do so with less funding. I just want to get more of an analysis about the \$584 million and how that is broken down into the non-government disability sector in relation to residential accommodation services and the DHS services, and if there is a disparity between the two, why is that?

The CHAIR — There are a number of strands there, Minister, if you can try to deal with them.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — It relates to the same figure.

Ms NEVILLE — It is the dollar figures that you are — —

Mr DALLA-RIVA — The dollar figure and you have quantity over there on page 110 — clients in shared supported accommodation. That would not be totally DHS, would it?

Ms NEVILLE — No.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — So I just want a bit more of an analysis in terms of — —

Ms NEVILLE — What I can give you is a bit of a breakdown of who provides how many facilities. I can do that.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — You can take it on notice, if you want.

Ms NEVILLE — I will have to take on notice the actual breakdown of the costs, so how much in dollars goes to CSOs to deliver supported accommodation. But I can give you a breakdown of the type of accommodation.

There are about 1060 facilities in out-of-home accommodation support services. Of that, 905 are long-term group homes, 82 facilities providing respite, 23 facilities providing congregate care, 14 accommodation units providing independent living and 14 units providing outreach accommodation. A total of 280 of these supported accommodations are owned and operated by non-government organisations but the majority are owned by the Department of Human Services, either through the secretary of the department or the Office of Housing.

A number of the department-owned properties are managed by community service organisations under funding and service agreements with the department. At the moment there are around 4980 places in the group home component. All the new facilities that we are currently building are being done in partnership with the non-government organisations.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Through you, Chair — —

The CHAIR — The federal funding you asked about as well. You can take it on notice.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — You can take it on notice about the federal funding.

Ms NEVILLE — It is not allocated separately; it does not go commonwealth to the non-government sector. It is in the pool. In the disability services budget output, the total figure of commonwealth contribution in 2009–10 is \$208 million, and we put in \$1079 million. As I said earlier, over 80 per cent of the disability output is funded by the state.

Mr DALLA-RIVA — Also on notice, the cost per place of the NGO versus the DHS. I do not expect you to have it on here but just on notice.

The CHAIR — All right. Thank you very much for that. Minister, I would like to welcome your statement before about autism and the fact that it is now seen as a neurological disorder and disability, which I am sure the autism sector welcomes. Could you tell us, in budget paper 3, page 41, just where we going on the autism state plan? Can you give us a bit more detail on that, particularly going into the future?

Ms NEVILLE — Thanks, Chair. This month is actually autism awareness month.

The CHAIR — That is correct.

Ms NEVILLE — And we will be launching the state plan some time this month as part of the autism state plan. As I said earlier, this plan is probably a unique plan in that it was a real partnership between government and Autism Victoria as well as very extensive consultation with people with autism, families, carers and people who are involved in working with people with autism. The plan will provide a platform for building new and improved approaches right across government to better meet the needs of families and children with autism spectrum disorder.

As I touched on earlier, as part of the autism state plan and some of the priorities that have been identified by families, the budget provides \$8.2 million over four years to commence implementation of that plan, and they

are really in the critical areas that families identified with us as some of the key priorities. Just over \$4 million will be provided by the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. This will see the development of things like autism spectrum disorder plans, education and workforce development — really skilling up our early childhood workers, our teachers to be able to better support and respond to often challenging behaviours that might result from autism.

There will be coordinated positions to support regional autism consultation and training networks, and also specialist secondary consultation to support the early childhood workforce in working with children with highly complex ASD. There is \$4.16 million to DHS to enhance the capacity within our child and adolescent mental health services and to build our ASD expertise in the mental health workforce. There will be increases in staffing to our CAMHS services, which will include the appointment of 14 dedicated coordinators to manage the process of diagnostic assessment of children and young people with complex presentations of ASD. Operational guidelines will be developed and ASD training to the specialist mental health workforce will also be rolled out.

The plan will build on the government's announcement, as you mentioned, Chair, last year to include all people with ASD under the Disability Act. In the development of that act and for a very long time, people have argued that ASD is a neurological disorder and should be acknowledged under the Disability Act. That change back in December enabled that to happen. We provided some additional support at the time to improve the information and support for families and individuals with ASD, to assist them in doing planning and case management.

There was also funding allocated to Autism Victoria, who are working in partnership with the Association for Children with a Disability, to improve the information referral processes as well as providing additional peer and parent support groups. There has also been money allocated to fund ASD case consultant practitioners, who will be established in each region. They will provide secondary consultation for case managers working with families and individuals with ASD and provide some regional leadership. It is one of the really critical areas in autism. It is still a very poorly understood issue, which means that diagnosis, treatment, care, access to information — all of that — is very misunderstood in a whole range of services. That is really one of the key focuses of the commitments we have made in this budget, to try to address some of those particular issues.

We are also working with the Australian government to help families maximise the benefits of the commonwealth initiative, which provides families access to funding for some early intervention support. Being able to clear some of the waiting lists in our CAMHS services for diagnosis will actually assist families to get earlier access to some of the commonwealth money. Absolutely, families having access to early intervention services makes a difference to life outcomes for children with ASD.

Just in the consultation on the autism state plan, over 1000 Victorians participated. I think the plan combined with these initiatives will really go a long way to improving the lives of families who have children with autism and people who live with autism spectrum disorder.

Mr WELLS — Minister, I refer you to budget paper 3, page 112, child protection. According to the 2007–08 DHS annual report, there were 1556 child protection staff employed by the department. Of these, how many actually have contact with children, and what will be the figure over the forward estimates, please?

Ms NEVILLE — That figure, as I understand, will not be full-time effective. That will be — —

Mr WELLS — Okay, it is 1556, and full-time effective is 1421, so we will work on 1421.

Ms NEVILLE — And the question was, 'How many have contact?'.

Mr WELLS — Of the 1421, how many have contact with children?

Ms NEVILLE — They all front-line staff, so they are all working with children in the front line.

Mr WELLS — So of the total amount, every single person in the child protection unit has contact with children?

Ms NEVILLE — They would be working as teams, so you might have a supervisor —

Mr WELLS — No, no. How many actually have contact with children?

The CHAIR — The minister to answer.

Ms NEVILLE — The overwhelming majority of them would have contact. They are front-line staff; they are doing — —

Mr WELLS — How many?

Ms NEVILLE — I do not know. I would have to give you a breakdown of supervisors.

Mr WELLS — There is a roomful of hardworking public servants. Someone would have the number.

Ms NEVILLE — The way that child protection works, people do not work in isolation; people rightly work in teams. There is a process, absolutely, of ensuring quality, of ensuring supervision. It is a very difficult area to work in. Of course out of that group of people would be some people who provide supervision work — —

Mr WELLS — Yes, I understand all that.

Ms NEVILLE — — people who oversee cases, who review case files, who might do a number of those case files to ensure that we are delivering quality services across the board. The vast majority of that workforce are front-line staff who would be meeting with families, working with families, working with children, going to the Children's Court, ensuring access between children and their families — the overwhelming majority. I would be guessing, but it would be certainly in the 90 per cent that would be front-line.

Mr WELLS — Would you take it on notice, then?

The CHAIR — The question has been asked. I have already suggested it be taken on notice and also, Minister, to estimate that going forward, too.

Mr WELLS — The actual number.

Ms NEVILLE — Yes.

Ms MUNT — Minister, I notice incidentally from the constituents who come through my door that low-income families are under growing pressure with their household budgets, particularly in relation to essential utilities like water. I was interested to see in your presentation and also at page 316 of budget paper 3 that additional funding has been provided for concessions in this budget. Could you detail that additional funding and how it would work?

Ms NEVILLE — You are right in saying that families are under additional pressure as a result of the global financial crisis but also the increasing costs as a result of drought and climate change, so the cost of basic utilities has continued to increase. We have a strong commitment to ensuring that low-income households in Victoria are able to afford access to these essential services. This includes ensuring that our hardship programs continue to be effective in reaching those most in need. We currently assist directly around 725 000 households through the provision of more than \$1 billion worth of concessions, rebates, allowances. They provide assistance across gas, electricity, water, schools, kindergartens, public and private transport, and ambulance, dental and other health services.

We have new challenges with the financial crisis but also with the changing climate that we are experiencing, which has seen the increase in prices for essential services. In response, we have a number of measures which are about trying to ensure that these essential services remain affordable for our low-income households.

In particular, in this budget we introduced a further increase in our water and sewerage concession, to assist the most vulnerable members of our community to gain affordable access to this essential service. This year's budget provides an increase to the water and sewerage concession cap, rising from \$189.70 to \$216.60, which represents around about a 14.18 per cent increase in that concession cap. Overall this is around about \$42 million over four years.

On top of that, we have also increased what is known as our Water Wise program. We are providing \$2.3 million to assist in water demand reduction programs, so not just assisting people with affordability around

bills but in the long term ensuring in a sustainable way that they are able to reduce their water use and also bring down the cost of their overall bills.

We have already had a Water Wise program that commenced in January this year out of money from the 2008–09 budget, which is targeted at assisting around 1000 households in hardship to reduce their water consumption through things like free water audits and retro fits, valued up to about \$500 per household. The new Water Wise program will be extended and will see perhaps around about another 4000 households assisted and we will be working with the water companies to really target this additional money to ensure it reaches those low-income households that have the biggest water use in their areas.

These are really important measures to assist in keeping water and sewerage affordable for low-income families. Of course our range of other concessions — electricity and gas concessions, which are uncapped — will continue to play a really critical role in ensuring access to essential services.

The CHAIR — Before I call on Mr Rich-Phillips, I note on your budget estimates questionnaire you have a breakdown in terms of staff, but under allied health, child protection, disability executives et cetera.

Ms NEVILLE — I do not know if it —

The CHAIR — It is not a complete picture, because some of VPS are involved in that. Could you provide for the committee a breakdown of the VPS staff, in the normal fashion that that is done?

Ms NEVILLE — Yes.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — Minister, I would like to ask you about the Community Offenders Advice and Treatment Service that operates through juvenile justice. There have been reports that a number of organisations that provide forensic services as part of COATS have received cuts in funding as what I understand are administrative changes within DHS. Can you outline the basis of that and why that has occurred, what funding has been provided for the COATS service for the last couple of years and for the budget year, and what organisations receive funding under COATS and how much?

Ms NEVILLE — It is actually under the drug output. COATS does not deliver to youth justice. It is a federally funded program which, as I mentioned earlier, comes via the state and it is targeted at people in the DOJ under the prison system, not at youth justice. We have our own drug support programs in youth justice.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — So who is responsible for administering it?

Ms NEVILLE — It does sit with me, but it is under the mental health area. I am happy to have a look and provide that information — I just do not have it here in front of me — when we get onto mental health very shortly.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — You will in 10 minutes?

Ms NEVILLE — Yes, I am happy to do that.

Mr RICH-PHILLIPS — All right. Thank you.

Mr NOONAN — Minister, I am looking at budget paper 3, page 40, under ‘Assisting vulnerable children’, and I want to ask a question about emergency child protection. I note that there is \$14.6 million over four years to enhance the capacity to respond to children in crisis outside of office hours. I wonder whether you can provide details of this funding and the extra services that it will provide?

Ms NEVILLE — As I mentioned earlier, there is \$14.65 million over four years in this budget to address the rising demand for after-hours emergency and crisis response services for children in need of protection or at risk of exploitation or remand. The After Hours Child Protection Emergency Service is a crisis service that responds to urgent calls after hours from both professionals and the community in relation to child protection concerns. It is run by a very dedicated staff group, and we recently celebrated its 20th anniversary.

The service performs a vital community service for very vulnerable children and young people, particularly those who might need an urgent response. On a typical day its workload includes responding to reports from

hospital medical professionals about new cases of serious abuse and neglect; responding to calls from Victoria Police about children that may have been abused, abandoned or orphaned; responding to reports from family members about the care or safety of a child or young person; receiving reports about children that may be missing from their home or placement; and outreaching to young people who may be engaging in high-risk behaviours, such as illicit drug use or self-harming behaviours in the CBD or St Kilda.

Often these calls may be received late in the day and some in the middle of the night. Often the caller is distressed and deeply concerned, and the response needs to be calm, compassionate and alert to all the potential risk and safety issues. In 2008 the service handled nearly 40 000 incoming calls. The new funding announced in the state budget is targeted at ensuring that after-hours calls about child protection emergencies are answered in a timely way; enhancing the capacity to provide an outreach response for those children who require immediate action after hours as a result of those calls; addressing the significant increase in demand for after-hours assessment of the suitability of a young person for bail, to ensure appropriate conversion from remand; and ensuring, as I said, consistent coverage with extended hours across the CBD and St Kilda areas.

The funding will extend the capacity of after hours, the bail service and also the street work outreach program. Funding of \$14.65 million with \$3.52 million this year will be provided to ensure that we are able to meet the benchmark that we have set for this service, which is 80 per cent of calls being answered within 90 seconds, and to increase the service's capacity to provide the outreach to actually be able to go out to families and children who are at risk. It will ensure that the service's call-taking capacity is brought in line with other emergency services' responses and also community expectations. These are really critical services. They operate at times of often very high crisis in families' and children's lives. These additional resources will ensure that we are able to provide the most timely and best quality responses to these very vulnerable children.

The CHAIR — I thank you, Minister, and Mr McDonald, Mr Rogers and Mr McIsaac for their attendance.

Witnesses withdrew.