



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**Main Committee**

**ADJOURNMENT**

**Swan Electorate: Youth Focus Foundation**

**SPEECH**

**Thursday, 26 February 2009**

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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## SPEECH

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<b>Questioner</b>	<b>Responder</b>
<b>Speaker</b> Irons, Steve, MP	<b>Question No.</b>

**Mr IRONS** (Swan) (12.41 pm)—I congratulate the member for Werriwa for the basket of goodies he has just told us about. I rise today to talk about the issue of youth suicide and the efforts of a charitable organisation within my electorate to prevent it. I begin with some sobering statistics. In 2005, young people accounted for 14 per cent of all suicide deaths. A 2002 Western Australian child health survey found that 16 per cent of WA adolescents between 12 and 16 years of age reported having had suicidal thoughts in the previous six months. The highest occurrence was 29.1 per cent among girls aged between 15 and 16 years. Youth suicide is clearly a serious problem in WA and across the nation, and it is a problem that appears to be worsening: between 1996-97 and 2005-06, the hospitalisation rate for intentional self-harm by young people increased by a dramatic 43 per cent. Depression, which is one of the early signs associated with suicide and self-harm, has been predicted by the World Health Organisation to become the second-highest cause of illness globally by 2020, yet this is an issue that is not talked about enough in Canberra. I hear speeches about road safety in this place; however, the latest figures available, from 2004, reveal that 500 more Australians die from suicide than from road accidents each year. This is clearly an area all members need to focus on.

An organisation within my electorate is battling this rising tide and deserves enormous credit. The Burswood based Youth Focus Foundation is a community based charitable organisation with expertise in providing support and solutions for young people—and the families of young people—aged between 12 and 18 who show early signs of suicide, depression and self-harm. These services are provided free of charge. Services include youth counselling services; family counselling services; a peer support program which runs therapeutic, recreation based groups for 14- to 18-year-olds; and a mentor program which provides mentors and engages with young people who have completed a six-week training program. Locals do not have to travel to Burswood to access these services. The qualified professionals of the organisation travel to schools, community centres or even local parks to deliver the services. In 2007, Youth Focus assisted 552 young people and 138 families. Many lives have been saved. They provide an outstanding service and should be commended. Unfortunately, the services provided by Youth Focus are under threat. Thirteen per cent of Youth Focus funding comes from government, and the remaining 87 per cent comes from non-government sources. Government funding for Youth Focus in the last 12 months has included two federal funding grants totalling \$37,000, which they are very grateful for.

However, the charity encounters several problems with its government funding which I would like to raise with the House. First, funding grants tend to be based around new projects. This makes maintaining proven, successful projects very difficult indeed. Additionally, the competitive nature of the grant process makes it difficult to establish collaborative partners and, given the economic crisis, businesses are less and less likely to fund the balance with donations. We must consider altering the application requirements to rectify this. The second point on government spending is that it is simply insufficient. Youth Focus said it had to turn away at least 300 people last year because it simply did not have the money to help them. This is unacceptable, and as long as I am in parliament I will push for this to be rectified.

I believe that we, as federal lawmakers, need to take a significant part of the responsibility for this. Youth Focus receives 40 per cent of its referrals from schools. However the WA department of education funds only the provision of one full-time councillor; instead funding the provision of social workers, chaplains, school psychologists and nurses, who in turn refer students to Youth Focus. This seems to be a waste of resources. The contribution from the federal department of education is also limited. I will be writing to the WA and federal ministers for education to suggest a policy change to reflect this.

It is the lack of money which means that Youth Focus has to rely heavily on non-government funding. I am pleased to report to the House that private organisations within my electorate have contributed to this cause. These include the Burswood Entertainment Complex and Mustard Catering. However, as one might suspect in these tough economic times, businesses have been reducing the scale of their charitable contributions. This is happening at a time when the global financial crisis is putting more pressure on families and when the services provided by Youth Focus are becoming increasingly in demand. This not only highlights the need for

strong economic management to bring us out of recession but also reinforces the need for federal government investment. It will not be massively expensive and will save lives. Not many policies can claim to achieve that.

In conclusion, youth suicide is regrettably a problem in my electorate and across Australia. However, it can be minimised through the work of groups like Youth Focus Foundation. The commendable work of the foundation helps to achieve these goals. *(Time expired)*