

HANSARD
QUESTION
COMMUNITY CHILD HEALTH SERVICES — WAIT TIMES
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446. Dr M.D. NAHAN to the Minister for Health:

I would like to bring the attention of the house a guest in the Speaker's gallery, James Aiona, the former Lieutenant-Governor of the great state of Hawaii.

[Applause.]

Dr M.D. NAHAN: In last year's budget, a substantial amount of funding was provided to improve the timely access to community child health services. A very tough target of 50 per cent in the first year was set for reducing waiting times. Can the minister please inform the house whether that challenging target was achieved?

Dr K.D. HAMES replied:

I thank the member for the question. The treatment of people with certain disabilities, particularly speech disabilities, was a significant problem when we came to government, with extensive waiting times. I have to say that in our early years of government, the waiting times were becoming worse. As demand grew, there were insufficient speech therapists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists and paediatricians involved in treating young children with disabilities, and those waiting times were growing.

As a result of an excellent report by the Education and Health Standing Committee, we committed to responding to those recommendations for a significant increase in support for services in those areas. We committed \$50 million in the previous budget to employ significantly increased numbers of people, particularly speech pathologists, because it is critical for a child with a disability to be seen and treated early.

We set a target to reduce those wait times by 50 per cent and I am very pleased to advise the house that those targets have either been exceeded in many instances, or almost reached in many, with significant improvements. I would like to read the percentages of improvement to the house. For speech pathology, the improvement is exactly 50 per cent. The wait time for people having to see a speech pathologist was 18.8 months; that is now down to 9.4 months.

In my view, that is still too long, but the speech pathologists, despite growing demand, have been able to see patients at such a rate that they are steadily eating into that waiting list. In just 12 months, they have been able to reduce that time by 50 per cent. Occupational therapists have reduced the wait times by 51.3 per cent, down to 7.5 months from 15 months. Physiotherapy and wait times have been reduced from 12.4 months to 5.3 months, a 57.3 per cent reduction. Clinical psychology wait times have been reduced by 42.7 per cent, and social work wait times 33.3 per cent.

Dr J.M. Woollard: Well done, minister. What about community health nurses in the schools, though?

Dr K.D. HAMES: My next sentence was to address that! I am determined, as I have said previously, that in this term of government we will address the rest of those issues raised in the committee's report. In my view, this is an excellent start and I foresee these waiting times getting better.

Mr M.P. Whitely interjected.

Dr K.D. HAMES: Does the member want a mention? I said "the committee"; I know that the member for Bassendean was on the committee.

Mr M.P. Whitely: Whose initiative was it?

Dr K.D. HAMES: Yes, it was the member for Bassendean's initiative to start that review in the first place, but I think it might be our government's initiative to put \$50 million in place to address it!