COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

HOUSE OF

REPRESENTATIVES

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CORRECTIONS

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BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

PROOF

In Oxenford you will find a Medicare urgent care clinic. But here's the thing. I remember something from some time ago. In November 2013 a previous Labor government opened the Gold Coast's first GP super clinic at Oxenford—miraculously! It is located at No. 2, Leo Graham Way, Oxenford. Now, that is incredible. You wouldn't think that, 10 years later, to the month, Health Minister Butler, in November 2023, would announce a Medicare urgent care clinic at No. 2 Leo Graham Way, Oxenford. There are striking similarities. They are in the same building. They do the same thing. They provide bulk-billing services with longer hours. What have we got? We have got a GP super clinic that was rebadged as a Medicare urgent care clinic. There has been no increase in patient numbers. This is the same service in the same building, which the health minister is dressing up as a new initiative to deliver on an election commitment. Actually, it is completely misleading the Australian people.

The coalition has a proud record on health. With this motion, Labor are, typically, trying to search for a corflute slogan for the upcoming election. They should spend less time trying to attack the coalition and more time trying to fix the health system. Australians know the coalition can be trusted on health.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Young): The time allotted for this debate has expired. The debate is adjourned, and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

Royal Far West

Mr COULTON (Parkes—Chief Nationals Whip) (11:50): I move:

That this House:

(1) acknowledges that:

(a) Royal Far West (RFW) is a national charity dedicated to the health and wellbeing of Australia's country children across more than 200 schools and 364 communities; and

(b) RFW is celebrating its centenary of service to Australia in 2024;

(2) notes that:

(a) in 2019, RFW received funding from the Department of Health and Aged Care to provide services online to schools and preschools under the National Paediatric Telecare Service (NPTS), and that funding finishes in June next year;

(b) workforce shortages in regional areas, and a resulting lack of access to services, has seen high demand for NPTS;

(c) the NPTS overcomes the tyranny of distance and reduces expenses for families in the midst of a cost of living crisis; and

(d) operating across four states, the NPTS has provided support to 20,000 children, parents and educators; and

(3) urges the Government to provide ongoing funding to RFW to allow this vital allied health and mental health service to continue to support families in rural, regional and remote Australia.

In December this year, next month, Royal Far West will be 100 years old. I can proudly say that its roots are firmly planted in the Parkes electorate. Reverend Drummond, who spent time himself recuperating in Manly all that time ago, thought, 'Wouldn't it be wonderful to bring children from the country to the coast, where they could get medical care and assistance—not only those children but their families as well?'

The first lot of children that came in from the country came from places like Brewarrina, Bourke and Cobar. One of the first establishments was an old railway carriage that was repurposed for use as a clinic in Cobar. So Royal Far West has a long and proud history in delivering care to children from remote parts of Australia, largely New South Wales, but it has now expanded into other areas. Originally, as children and families were brought in to their facility at Manly, they had an all-encompassing, all-round service that focused on not only the needs of the child but how the family could assist as well.

Clearly, with the growing need and the changes in technology, Royal Far West has now expanded, providing services over a much larger area to a larger number of schools. In 2019, Royal Far West was funded under the previous government, under Minister Hunt—the regional health minister—to expand their services under telecare. We are now seeing a significant number of children. Indeed, last year they supported 21,000 country children. While telecare and technology is not a complete replacement, it's certainly enabling them to reach a larger number of people.

I've actually sat in on some of the lessons. A great example of this is Narromine Public School, in my electorate, which has been doing this now for 10 years. There is a coordinator in the school. There is an occupational therapist, a speech therapist or whoever working on screen. What the therapist has is replicated in the school. We've seen, after the initial assessments done of the child, significant contribution. As we know—and my good friend and colleague opposite the member for Macarthur would know—the sooner an intervention can happen with a child the better chance we've got to get them on the straight and narrow.

There is a concern, though, that the funding runs out next year, and I met with Royal Far West last week. They are concerned, because they are caught up in the electoral cycle as well. We've got an election coming up. There's

uncertainty around that. Will there be a budget? Will there not be a budget? All of those things are concerning them. Now that they've got this up and running, if they had this funding cut, they would have to see a reduction of about 50 per cent in the number of students that they support.

Clearly, the purpose for me for bringing this motion to the House is not only to provide to the members and the House itself the importance of the Far West but also to highlight to the government of the day—and also the opposition as well if there's a change of government—the need for certainty around this funding for the Royal Far West. It does a wonderful job. It gets a lot of children in a practical and meaningful way and is making a huge change to what they're doing. Twenty per cent of the children who are under these programs are Indigenous and 50 per cent are under eight years old. That's exactly the time when this intervention wants to be. I recommend the motion to the House and strongly urge the government to look at the funding ongoing.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Young): Is there a seconder for the motion?

Mr Chester: I second the motion and reserve my right to speak.

Dr FREELANDER (Macarthur) (11:55): I first of all thank the member for Parkes for bringing this motion. I also add that I'm very sad to see him leaving parliament at the end of this term. He's been a great addition to the parliament—in particular, his interest in rural and regional health has been really important, and I thank him for his service. On the health committee he's been a great asset, so I thank him for that.

I know the Royal Far West very, very well. In fact, when I was a senior registrar at the children's hospital many, many years ago, my wife and I used to take kids who were staying at the Royal Far West out for day outings et cetera around Sydney. I remember one boy, Peter, a lovely, lovely kid with very unstable diabetes. People were frightened to take him away from health care, so my wife and I took him to lots of different places. We took him to the Easter show. We took him to Bondi Beach and all around the place. He was from Broken Hill and was staying in the Far West so that he could be treated at the children's hospital, then at Camperdown, for his diabetes, which, as I said, was quite unstable. He stayed there for many weeks at a time. He used to come every year. He came from a family at Broken Hill who struggled with his health care, and I think the Royal Far West really made a difference to his health care and the management of his diabetes.

We had another boy—quite a funny little boy—from Lismore, I remember, called Shane. Shane had something called Ondine's curse, which is a very rare condition: when he went to sleep, he'd stop breathing. It sounds quite odd, but that's what he had. He stayed at Far West quite a lot whilst his ventilator was being stabilised before he went back to Lismore. We took him out several times. We also took him to the Easter show.

Another girl, called Melissa, had seizure disorder. I think came from Dunedoo. She was at the Royal Far West while her epilepsy was being stabilised.

The paediatrician at Manly, my old friend Alan Oldfield, who's no longer with us, used to help manage these kids in cooperation with their GP or paediatrician where they came from whilst they stayed in the Royal Far West. It was a great, great service. Clearly, the needs have changed a lot in the last 40 years since we cared for these kids. The government has provided significant funding for mental health support, particularly following the floods and bushfires that have beset our country in the last decade, particularly for support in communities for kids with developmental problems. As the member for Parkes had commented, once these kids are picked up—and, hopefully, picked up early—intervention makes a huge difference not only to their lives but to their families as well. The Royal Far West has been integral in that, trying to replicate services for kids from the bush compared to kids who lived in the inner cities and close to the major children's hospitals.

The government's provided $20 million through the Royal Far West for the Community Health and Hospitals Program. We've provided telehealth services. I agree with the member for Parkes that it is important that this funding is committed to over the longer term so that ongoing services can be provided for those kids. We're very, very lucky to have a service like the Royal Far West system, and I, for one, will commit to getting the government to continue supporting Royal Far West in their expanded role to those communities that have been really severely affected by the natural disasters which, in this era of climate change, are not going to stop. They're going to continue. It is very important that Royal Far West continues in its fantastic work throughout our rural and regional communities.

We know, wherever we are in Australia, that the mental health system is facing huge challenges. Our government is committed to making sure we have fit-for-purpose and best-for-purpose services throughout the country, not just in the inner cities. Mental health reform was part of our last federal budget, and it will continue to be the focus of our future budget in 2025.

We are very lucky to have a service like Royal Far West. I enjoyed very much the time I spent learning from them about how best to provide services to kids in our rural and regional areas. Long may it continue. I thank the member for Parkes for bringing this motion, and I commit to supporting it.

Mr CHESTER (Gippsland) (12:00): Like the member for Macarthur, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the member for Parkes for bringing forward this very important motion but also acknowledge that he has announced his retirement. He gave a valedictory speech last week. Smalltown Australia does need big, strong, sensible voices, and the member for Parkes has been one throughout his career. It's also fitting that the member for Macarthur mentioned Broken Hill in his contribution, because not so long ago I was at a function with the member for Riverina, and he told the member for Parkes, 'Do you know, if Broken Hill was in my electorate, they'd just call it the Hill, because I would have fixed it by now!'

All dad jokes aside, the member for Parkes has served with great distinction in this place. He's been a friend and a trusted colleague, whose passion for rural and regional Australia knows no bounds. He has always been someone focused on practical and sensible outcomes. That's why this motion today fits very nicely with his entire mode of operation throughout his political career. At its heart, this motion is about helping young people achieve their full potential but also publicly acknowledging an organisation that has done more than just talk about the problem.

Royal Far West has been out there for 100 years now, making a difference in our rural and regional communities. Royal Far West has had 100 years of service to Australians. It has been able to overcome the tyranny of distance to provide those early intervention services which have made it easier for young people in our rural and regional communities to access services and to achieve their full potential. It's also particularly important to acknowledge, as the member for Parkes did, that it has helped to reduce the cost of living for families in those rural and remote communities, who are able to access services and facilities without always having to travel to metropolitan areas.

Royal Far West has demonstrated a capacity and capability, which is why it's so important that this government—and any future government—continues to invest in solutions that have been proven to work on the ground in rural and regional areas. There is an opportunity, particularly for us in our rural and remote communities, to provide services using technology in locations where we can't always attract the skilled specialist health staff we need. Nothing is better than having a skilled health provider treating people in our communities or going around schools and meeting young people, but if that's not available to us then we should be using technology in the same way that Royal Far West has been using technology through its National Paediatric Telecare Service. This is a great example of a local solution to a local problem which is being financed by the Commonwealth and which is really making a difference on the ground in rural and remote communities.

I would make one other point, and it's a shout-out to any young health professionals thinking about careers in rural and regional communities. Don't believe everything you read in the newspapers. Get out there and have a look and see what you can experience and the career fast track that exists in our rural and regional communities. You will get exposure to a whole range of issues, ailments and conditions that will fast-track your career. It's a great experience. Anyone in the health sector looking at a rural experience should consider moving to a rural and remote community and offering their services to communities that perhaps don't normally have access to those skilled health professionals.

It makes sense to invest in the continuation of the National Paediatric Telecare Service. As the member for Parkes indicated, early intervention has very clear benefits for the young person, their social achievements and their own personal achievements in life. But there are also economic benefits for the government. The savings that ensue from early intervention and the prevention of some longer-term issues are clearly evident in the reductions in costs for the government down the track. It is well known that Royal Far West provides outstanding services. It's also well known that in our rural and remote communities our children's health, education and wellbeing have some additional barriers. And the whole point of what Royal Far West has been doing, and what the member for Parkes has done throughout his entire parliamentary career, is to try to help young people in our communities achieve their full potential by improving access to services for them.

The final point I would make is in relation to the ongoing funding model. The reason the member for Parkes has moved this motion is that the provision of certainty through the continuity of funding gives an organisation like Royal Far West the confidence to employ a workforce and have ongoing employment opportunities. When funding runs out on short-term contracts the workforce has to start looking around for a new job probably six to eight months before the contract even runs out, and they sometimes leave prematurely. So having that certainty and continuity will give confidence to Royal Far West and their workforce to continue to make a huge difference throughout rural and regional Australia, and I commend the member for Parkes for his motion.

Mr DAVID SMITH (Bean—Government Whip) (12:05): I'd also like to commend the member for Parkes for bringing this motion before the House. Royal Far West is a charity dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of country children and has been doing so since 1924—almost a hundred years. Their work addresses service gaps and supports our most vulnerable families and communities to help students meet learning, wellbeing and engagement outcomes through unique, multidisciplinary and child-centred approaches that partner with families, schools and communities to provide truly integrated and collaborative wraparound care. RFW provides

multidisciplinary allied health screening, assessment and therapy services for children up to 12 years old. It also provides capacity building services for parents, carers, teachers and local health professionals. And while the RFW traditionally operates from a hub in Manly, New South Wales, using telecare and working with local communities, RFW's services extend to rural and remote areas right across Australia. I note that, while RFW does not operate in or service the ACT or my electorate of Bean, it plays an important role across the region. And as a member of this national parliament I, and I believe all of us in this parliament, have an interest in appropriate and cost-effective services being delivered for all citizens across all parts of the nation.

At this point I note and acknowledge the correspondence my office has received about this matter from the Catholic Education Office, Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn. The Catholic Education Office have communicated to me the important work done in remote communities like Lake Cargelligo and the critical difference they're making to some of our local First Nations communities. These representations have aided my understanding of the works that RFW does in the capital region and the issues around its future.

I'm advised that since the COVID-19 pandemic RFW has shifted its footprint to delivering approximately 40 per cent of its clinical and service staff and services in communities across the four states. In 2023, they supported over 21,000 country children, parents and educators, of whom 30 per cent identified as First Nations Australians. Over the last seven years, since 2018-19, the Community Health and Hospitals Program provided RFW $19.7 million to expand their service and upgrade necessary infrastructure. This funding runs to 30 June 2025. The government also provided RFW with just over $300,000 in 2023 under an October 2022 budget allocation to support community sector organisations to manage the cost of staff wages and higher inflation. In addition to the CHHP, RFW received community recovery program and bushfire recovery program funding across six separate state and Commonwealth grants.

The mental health and wellbeing of all Australians is a priority for the Australian government, including for children and their families affected by disasters. I recognise the important work of Royal Far West, particularly their work supporting young people through periods of national disaster and recovery, and the pressure this places on their funding sources. The National Disaster Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework was released in 2023. The framework was developed in consultation with, and agreed by, state and territory governments. The framework aims to guide how governments and recovery partners consistently and sustainably support the delivery of mental health services and improve the wellbeing of affected individuals before, during and after disasters.

The Department of Health and Aged Care is working closely with the National Emergency Management Agency to implement the framework. Under the framework, states and territories have the lead role in emergency planning and coordination. The government recognises the importance of locally led and delivered responses and that states and territories are best placed to identify the type and level of assistance to make available following a natural disaster.

But it's critical that organisations like Royal Far West are not forgotten in this work. At the national level, organisations like these can fall through the cracks despite the critical work they're doing. So I support the government continuing to work closely with Royal Far West, and we will, of course, engage in further discussions about their future and support further funding for RFW.

Mr McCORMACK (Riverina) (12:10): At the outset, I wish to heartily commend the member for Parkes for bringing forward this very important motion. Certainly, for a regional member—somebody who represents half of the landmass of New South Wales—health is critical. If you have a healthy electorate, you have a happy electorate. No-one knows this better than the member for Parkes, who has championed the cause of Royal Far West for as long as he has been in this place, since 2007, and, indeed, even long before that, when he was in local government and when he was just a concerned member of his country community.

This year, we celebrate 100 years of Royal Far West. I well recall when, on Monday 17 December 2018, as Deputy Prime Minister, I attended the opening of the Centre for Country Kids, the state-of-the-art facility that Royal Far West opened at Manly. I was there with: Gladys Berejiklian, the then New South Wales premier; the then New South Wales governor, David Hurley; and many, many others. Most importantly, whilst they were august, distinguished and honoured guests, it was the kids who we were there for—it was the kids who were the most vital guests at that particular function.

I said at the time—and I don't usually quote myself, but this is just for the record:

For generations, Royal Far West at Manly has held a special place in the hearts of country families when it comes to making sure distance is no barrier to accessing integrated health, education and mental support.

The expansion of this wonderful facility means Royal Far West can support even more country children and their families and provide the support, respite and care they need. Children in the regions are the future of our communities—The Liberals and Nationals Government is proud its investment supports Royal Far West to ensure country children access the same services their city counterparts and are given every opportunity to thrive.

That's what Royal Far West is about. That's what that $10 million investment was all about. I don't think it matters what side of the House you are on. This is important. This is proper. This is right. When you see that 190,000 children in rural and remote Australia have health and developmental needs that are not being met, you understand, you appreciate, just how important Royal Far West is. They support, as we've heard, children's developmental, mental and behavioural health so they can reach their full potential.

All politics is local. I know that, even in my own sprawling electorate—it is not quite as large as that of the member for Parkes, I appreciate—14 schools have 120 students benefitting from the services that Royal Far West provides each week. Of the Royal Far West services, it's really important to note that 93 per cent of educators were very satisfied with the service, 87 per cent of children achieved or exceeded the goals they had been set, 97 per cent of educators said they were more confident supporting the children they work with and 94 per cent said they would want to receive services in the future. They're telling statistics and they do tell a story of how vital this service is.

I know the member for Parkes and others have spoken too, in this debate, about how ongoing funding is essential—is crucial—because it will provide certainty for staff. When you get staff in remote areas, they do need that certainty. They want to have a reason to stay in that community, to provide for the children who most need the services.

Since the beginning of the National Paediatric Telecare Service funding in 2020, the service has supported more than 30,000 beneficiaries, expanded into four states—New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Western Australia—and partnered with a 152 schools and 64 early learning centres. It's something that sits at the heart of what Royal Far West does.

We support it. We want it to continue. We want it to expand. If you look, for example, at Royal Far West's innovative pilot program Better Learning Better Lives, which ran in five rural and remote schools—Trundle Central School; Rainbow P-12 College; Our Lady of Sacred Heart, Springsure; Clermont State School; and Middleton Public School—some 560 children benefited from the project.

So the results are there. The service is there. We just have to have the political will to make it happen.

Dr REID (Robertson) (12:15): I too commend the member for Parkes for bringing this motion forward. The health and wellbeing of those in rural and remote communities is absolutely paramount. In particular, we need to make sure that people can get the services they need when they need them.

I also want to make a comment on what the member for Gippsland was saying before he left the Federation Chamber—that students should really consider a career, particularly in a medical field, in regional, rural or remote communities. I've practised in hospitals in those settings, and you see a wide range of presentations. You become operationally and clinically independent. You also provide lifesaving and preventive care for people in communities in which health care can be quite scarce. So I want to agree with the member for Gippsland that people should definitely consider a career in regional, rural or remote healthcare settings.

Royal Far West is a charity that is dedicated to improving the health and wellbeing of country children. It was established long ago, in 1924. It provides multidisciplinary allied health screening and assessment and therapy for children up to 12 years old. The early screening and detection of pathology in younger years is so important. If it is not identified and treated, it can have huge ramifications for people as they enter their adolescence and their adult life. And it can not only have an impact on their health; it can also have an impact on their ability to study or enter the workforce, on their social interactions with other people and on how they interact in the community. So it's so important that we nip these issues in the bud early on so that they aren't exacerbated and become a significant problem into the future. That's what Royal Far West does. And it's not only in the allied health space. As the member for Riverina also pointed out, it provides capacity-building services for parents and carers, for teachers and for local health professionals.

Traditionally Royal Far West has operated from a hub in New South Wales, in Manly, but, by using telecare, its services have extended into rural areas, in New South Wales, Queensland, WA and also Victoria. We have found that, since the COVID-19 pandemic, Royal Far West has shifted its footprint from its Sydney base. Approximately 40 per cent of clinical and service staff now work in communities across the four states it services, which I think is fantastic. That's a great thing. Providing telecare and telehealth services is one thing, and there are benefits from doing that, but having people in place, in situ, where they can provide that assistance on the ground to people is something that we need. As I said, whether it's allied health, teachers, parents and carers or support staff, it's vitally important for children in these regional, rural and remote communities.

In 2023 Royal Far West supported over 21,000 country children, parents and educators, of whom 30 per cent identified as First Nations Australians. That's also an important thing to note. We know that our First Nations communities right across the country suffer from significantly worse health and social outcomes—I don't need to tell this chamber about that; a lot of our communities know that—so the support that Royal Far West is providing

to these communities is absolutely necessary. We know that they also commenced telecare services in 2014 and $19.7 million over seven years has been provided through the Community Health and Hospitals Program in 2018 and 2019 to expand this service and upgrade necessary infrastructure. This funding run through to 30 June 2025.

The government has also provided Royal Far West with just on $350,000 in 2023 under the October 2022 budget—an allocation to support community sector organisations to manage the cost of staff wages and higher inflation as well. In addition to this Community Health and Hospitals Program, there has also been some community recovery program and bushfire recovery program support across Commonwealth grants.

The DEPUTY SPEAKER (Mr Young): The time allotted for this debate has expired. The debate is adjourned and the resumption of the debate will be made an order of the day for the next sitting.

Cash

Ms RYAN (Lalor—Chief Government Whip) (12:20): I move:

That this House:

(1) acknowledges that the Government is making sure that Australians can continue to pay with cash for essential items if they want to, while also ensuring an orderly transition to phasing out cheques;

(2) notes the Government's plan will:

(a) mandate that businesses must accept cash when selling essential items, with appropriate exemptions for small businesses; and

(b) ensure that cash can be used for essential purchases, such as groceries and fuel, so that those who rely on cash will not be left behind; and

(3) welcomes the Government's acknowledgement that while Australians are increasingly using digital payment methods, there is an ongoing place for cash in our society.

The motion this morning is about the House acknowledging that the Albanese government is making sure that Australians can continue to pay with cash for essential items if they want to while also ensuring an orderly transition to the phasing out of cheques. Note that the government's plan will mandate that businesses must accept cash when selling essential items, with appropriate exemptions for small businesses, and ensure that cash can be used for essential purchases such as groceries and fuel so that those who rely on cash will not be left behind.

As the member for Lalor, I welcome our action on this. We're acting because of what we know. We know that around 1.5 million adult Australians rely on cash to make more than 80 per cent of in-person payments. We also know the number of businesses refusing to accept cash is growing as cash use in Australia declines. Some of that decline is incremental; RBA data from 2022 shows that up to 94 per cent of businesses reported accepting cash for payments, and that's a decline from 99 per cent of businesses just prior to the COVID pandemic. That feels like a small number, but it translates into millions of Australians feeling that, given our economy and the way we use money, they're being left behind in the process. The RBA data also shows that around half of Australia's businesses plan to move away from cash payments in the near future. All of this means that we as members of parliament can all see that this is going to make some Australians very nervous, particularly where they are accustomed to using cash and they have faith in a system that they've known.

We know that the demography here is that older Australians are those more likely to be concerned about this and less likely to have moved into non-cash arrangements in their personal lives. In my electorate there are 17,000 pensioners, if you look at those in that older category, and I believe that they deserve the right to depend on cash. The Albanese Labor government will ensure that no-one is left to fall through the cracks, implementing action to ensure that people can use cash for their purchases, particularly for essential purposes.

We know there's a place to cash in our society, and we can't deny older Australians this right. The announcement has been well received by both community groups and businesses as well as by individuals who simply prefer using cash in their transactions. Whether it's at the supermarket checkout or the local petrol station, when it comes down to the essentials, Australians will have the comfort of knowing they can pay in cash. This is incredibly important. We're doing this work to ensure that, for people in low-income or disadvantaged communities, who often face barriers to accessing digital banking, cash is available for them and available for use. This also allows those without smartphones or reliable internet access or bank accounts to purchase essentials.

If a storm hits, if we cut the power off, if the power gets cut off, if a bushfire breaks out, if we have to force families to evacuate or if telecommunication lines fail, it can leave people without access to banks. Part of this is how we ensure that those people can still access the essentials they need. We know that in recent years there have been two ways we can do this. In some instances, cash becomes primary; in other instances we actually need the capacity for government to pay into people's accounts electronically to ensure that they can do these things.