Legislative Council Hansard – 19 March 2025 – Proof

ROYAL FAR WEST

The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES (16:11): I move:

(1) That the House notes that Royal Far West will be celebrating its 100th anniversary in 2025.

(2) That the House acknowledges that:

(a) Royal Far West is a charity that improves the health and wellbeing of rural and remote children; and

(b) on 6 December 1924, Methodist minister Stanley Drummond envisioned bringing country children to the beach for respite, and since its founding in 1924 Royal Far West's care of rural and remote children has expanded from providing dental services and medical care to developmental, behavioural and mental health care.

(3) That this House commends the work of Royal Far West and its incredible journey and positive impact on the children and families of New South Wales.

Today I honour the truly remarkable organisation, Royal Far West. It has been a lifeline for families for 100 years, ensuring that children in rural and remote areas receive the health care they need and deserve. The Royal Far West story began in December 1924, when Reverend Stanley Drummond, a minister from Cobar, shared his vision to support country children who lacked access to essential health care. He found a kindred spirit in Dr George Moncrieff Barron, who, when describing their partnership of faith and medicine, famously declared, "You look after their souls, and I will look after their bodies." From that, Royal Far West was born. Some 100 years on it is one of Australia's most trusted charities, built on innovation, dedication and an unwavering commitment to the health and wellbeing of children in rural and remote communities.

In 1925 the first seaside camp was held in Manly, welcoming 58 children from Far West New South Wales. Those camps provided not only medical care but also a chance for children to experience the healing power of the ocean. Over the decades, the organisation expanded its services, introducing programs like the travelling baby clinics in the 1930s, which brought health care to remote communities by rail and air. Between the 1940s and 1970s the organisation expanded its facilities and services, with a growing emphasis on specialised medical care, including dental and eye health services.

During the 1980s Royal Far West shifted its focus to include developmental and mental health services. This included support for children with disabilities, learning difficulties and behavioural challenges. Royal Far West recognised the importance of a holistic approach to child wellbeing, working closely with families, schools and communities to provide tailored support that addressed the unique needs of each child. In response to the challenges of reaching remote communities, Royal Far West embraced telehealth technology. Today it is a pioneer in telehealth, using technology to connect children in remote areas with specialists they would otherwise never be able to access.

Today Royal Far West supports families across four States, adapting to meet the changing needs of country children. Royal Far West now operates with a team of more than 130 health professionals, including paediatricians, psychologists, speech pathologists and occupational therapists, offering services that address the medical, developmental and mental health needs of children. Through telehealth programs and outreach initiatives, it has embraced modern solutions to reach those in the hardest to reach places.

The impact of this organisation is far reaching. In the past year alone, 3,998 country children received direct support from Royal Far West which addressed a wide range of health needs, from developmental delays and disabilities to mental health challenges and chronic conditions. Its care extends beyond children to encompass the support systems around them—teachers, parents, carers and communities. When we account for those who have benefited indirectly, the number reaches an astonishing 24,358 people. In New South Wales, Royal Far West supports families from 470 towns across 182 postcodes. It is truly remarkable to think that no matter how remote or isolated a family might be, they are not forgotten.

Every child deserves the chance to thrive, and Royal Far West ensures this through a holistic approach that integrates health care, education and family support. Access to quality health care is a fundamental right, yet for many rural and remote communities it is still a privilege. Royal Far West has been a trailblazer in addressing this inequity, championing solutions like telehealth and outreach programs to bridge the gap. These services are not merely reactive but proactive, identifying health issues early and intervening before they become lifelong challenges.

This extraordinary milestone is marked by the *100 Years of Caring for Country Kids* photographic exhibition being launched in Parliament House this evening. This exhibition showcases photographs and artefacts that tell the incredible story of an organisation that has changed countless young lives. Throughout its history, Royal Far West has remained committed to its mission to "boldly go where the system stops, to wherever we are needed, using technology to ensure no child and no community is beyond our reach". I commend Royal Far West on its century of remarkable service and extend my gratitude to the dedicated professionals, volunteers and supporters who make this vital work possible. Especially, I acknowledge the work of Jacqueline Emery, CEO, and chair Joan Treweeke for their outstanding leadership, along with all board members who continue to steer this legacy. I urge all colleagues to take the time this evening to visit the exhibition. Together, we can ensure that Royal Far West continues its mission for another hundred years.

The PRESIDENT: I welcome representatives of Royal Far West to the Parliament of New South Wales today. I acknowledge in my gallery CEO Jacqueline Emery; general manager of strategy, Claire Taylor; and head of government relations and policy, Jenny Stevenson. I thank you all for the work that you do. You are all very welcome indeed.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE (16:16): I indicate that both the Government and I support this motion. I, too, acknowledge the CEO and other officials of Royal Far West in the President's gallery. It is important to celebrate an incredible 100 years of service and dedication that has shown to improve the health and wellbeing of children, especially in regional New South Wales. Families and children in rural areas face a significant barrier to accessing needs-based and appropriate health and educational support services, and 100 years of service is a powerful investment in the lives, wellbeing, health and development of kids in the bush.

As the duty MLC for Barwon, I celebrate that the fact that Royal Far West was first conceived by Cobar-based founder Reverend Stanley Drummond with support from others. Western and Far West New South Wales is a region this organisation has strongly supported since its inception, and it continues to do so. I marvel at the role Royal Far West played in introducing mobile baby health clinics in 1931, bringing basic paediatric services to New South Wales rural and remote communities via the Bourke, Cobar and Brewarrina railway lines. I commend the significant additional funding boosts provided by the State Government through NSW Health to paediatric services in the western region.

Royal Far West continues to provide programs to support an increased number of children with developmental and mental health concerns through in its child and family services and its "our schools and early years" services. In the last financial year it supported 515 children, 149 parents and carers, 128 educators, 21 schools and one early childhood centre. The service took on 30 per cent of referrals from the western and Far West region to the Centre for Country Kids. In particular, I highlight its focus on the delivery of critical health and development checks for four-year-olds.

Royal Far West deploys multidisciplinary teams and services via virtual care and in-community visits and has a large geographical footprint across the region, from the Bathurst Plains to the far north-west of the State. This virtual care delivery model was innovative and pioneering but has now become a mainstay in the practice of paediatric health care. The success of Royal Far West programs and the contributions from its staff, volunteers, donors and partners have had a longstanding impact to the vast benefit of regional communities. A centenary is a significant milestone indeed and should be recognised and lauded.

The Hon. SARAH MITCHELL (16:19): I also offer my support for the motion moved by my colleague the Hon. Natasha Maclaren-Jones, and add my congratulations to the team at Royal Far West on the amazing things that they have done for children in this State for over a century. I only have three minutes, but I could probably talk for 300 minutes about all the things that I admire about Royal Far West and its work. I have been a big supporter of the organisation for many years—the whole time that I have been in Parliament, really. I have been lucky to work with them in my various roles on a number of occasions.

The organisation's Healthy Kids Bus Stop ran for almost eight years. I first saw that onsite in Gunnedah, where Clair gave me a tour to show me what it was like to take health screening to kids in remote areas to make those early assessments so that they do not miss out on key developmental checks. That phenomenal program has literally changed the lives of thousands of kids. That early access to screening picked up on any developmental issues. I am happy to say it was the inspiration for the previous Government when we were looking to roll out a full suite of developmental checks for all children. We saw how well it could be done by an organisation like Royal Far West. I commend it for that.

I also commend the team for their incredible fundraising efforts. They have done lots of different things over the years. A highlight for me was the Ride for Country Kids. I did not ride, but one year I went out with the support crew. It was so much fun seeing hundreds of people coming to celebrate them in different towns along the way—people who would come every year to ride for Royal Far West, people whose families have been touched or impacted by Royal Far West and people who want to help fundraise and send a message about what the organisation does. The event has been going for more than a decade and has raised millions of dollars. It is an extraordinary effort to make that much money from community goodwill and donation, and shows the high esteem in which Royal Far West is held.

Certainly in my time as MP, but particularly as education Minister, I have met a number of families. When I visited schools or was in more remote areas people would talk about their kids going to Manly for the week to access specialist support. For a lot of those families it was the holiday that they would not have had without Royal Far West. For the mums, dads and siblings, it meant they could be a part of the experience while the child got the extra support they needed. It is a fantastic model. I say well done and congratulations on 100 years to Royal Far West. I acknowledge the team: chair of the board Joan Treweeke from Angledool—who I think is in Parliament for the exhibition tonight, which has a photo of me so I am quite chuffed—Jacqui Emery, Mark Driessen, Kim Casburn, Sally Davies, Danielle Chapman, Dr Marcel Zimmet, Claire Taylor and Jenny Stevenson. I thank them for what they do. They literally change the lives of children in rural and regional New South Wales. We are so proud to honour them in this place today.

Dr AMANDA COHN (16:22): The Greens support the motion. Royal Far West has been making a difference to the lives of children and families in country communities for 100 years. I congratulate it on this milestone. Over the century Royal Far West has worked to the principle that country kids have the right to equal critical developmental, behavioural and mental health services. We are unfortunately nowhere near this equity, with staggering differences in health and educational outcomes for children in rural and remote New South Wales. As Deputy Mayor of Albury back in 2019, I was delighted to cycle with Royal Far West on their Ride for Country Kids, which departed from Albury to Lake Cargelligo. Over the past ten years the Ride for Country Kids has travelled some 5,000 kilometres to visit many of our State's spectacular country towns, including my own community, to raise funds to support country families. But they really should not have to. This care should be provided in the public health system.

In major rural centres, including Wagga Wagga, Dubbo, Orange, Tamworth and Bega, waitlists for public and private paediatric assessments have blown out to up to four years where the books are not closed altogether. It is unacceptable to hear that Royal Far West "regularly receives phone calls from GPs across the State, in despair about the lack of paediatric access and assessment support for children who are developmentally vulnerable". The onus is on the Government to address this and not to continue to rely on charitable organisations to plug the gaps—for example, by retaining and attracting health workers like nurses, midwives and staff specialist doctors to NSW Health by paying them at least what they would earn in other States. In supporting the motion, The Greens also support Royal Far West's calls for the New South Wales Government to ensure adequate paediatric and developmental services, address health workforce shortages and ensure that country kids receive the support they need before delays in care create preventable lifelong disadvantage.

The Hon. SCOTT BARRETT (16:24): I congratulate the Royal Far West. One hundred years is a great achievement for any organisation, but for an NGO it is a particularly great achievement. An idea born in Cobar in 1924 is now an institution for children's health in regional New South Wales. More than congratulations, we need to say thanks for the work being done by the Royal Far West. Talk to anyone who has visited the site at Manly and you will hear nothing but praise and glowing reports of the building and the environment that is created within those walls. More than the location—which, for many kids, is their first chance see the beach—are the interactions with the staff. They are kind, caring and dedicated people who genuinely care about the kids and their families.

When I spoke with the users of the service there were some common emotional themes that came through, and it was hard not to be moved by the life-changing impact that the Royal Far West had on children, parents and families. I spoke to one particular parent, who quite emotionally told me that she was on the verge of giving up. She doubted her ability to parent and did not know where to turn next. After a week in Manly, for the first time in a long time, she walked away feeling hopeful and confident in her ability to parent her children. It gave her validity as a mother. That was a tough story to hear and the more I thought about that statement, the more impactful it is. It speaks to the immeasurable benefits of Royal Far West.

My personal interactions came when I was working for GIVIT, a charity that worked with Royal Far West on flood, bushfire and drought recovery. Our job was to provide essential items to Royal Far West so that they could get on with the caring. It was a privilege to have played that role. In addition to the care being offered in Manly, the outreach programs in allied health have provided huge benefits across regional New South Wales, particularly when done in partnership with our regional schools. Concerningly, though, we are hearing reports that some of our smaller rural schools are having to pull out of the "schools and early years services" that allow kids to access speech pathology, occupational therapy and psychology through telehealth and outreach programs.

The last thing we need is more children in remote areas slipping through the cracks; early intervention gives these kids the best chance at life. I ask the Government to work closely with Royal Far West on those programs. Royal Far West is such a wonderful organisation, and we are lucky to have it. Again, I congratulate Royal Far West on its centenary and thank the team for their work. To everyone else in the building, look out for this 100-year anniversary book that I know we will see more of this evening.

The PRESIDENT: Props are not normally allowed, but I will make an exception on this occasion.

The Hon. NATASHA MACLAREN-JONES (16:27): In reply: I thank my colleagues the Hon. Stephen Lawrence, the Hon. Sarah Mitchell, Dr Amanda Cohn and the Hon. Scott Barrett for their contributions. Also, as we have all said, I congratulate and thank not just the current team but also those who have worked over the past 100 years to make Royal Far West what it is today. In particular, I give a shout-out to the volunteers, who work tirelessly to provide support and assistance, as well as the donors and those who do the fundraising. The Hon. Sarah Mitchell referred to local communities, particularly in regional and rural areas. I also give a shout-out to those in the northern beaches area, from Manly through to Palm Beach, who are strong supporters of Royal Far West and have been for many years, the local businesses and individual schools. I thank them very much. I again congratulate Royal Far West and wish it all the best for tonight's event—and also for another 100 years.

The PRESIDENT: The question is that the motion be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.