

2019.10.08

19 Deputy M. Tadier of the Minister for Social Security regarding the potential impact of residency requirements on women in abusive relationships: (OQ.247/2019)

Further to recent statements made by the Jersey Women's Refuge and the States of Jersey Police that residency requirements to access income support and social housing are responsible for some women staying in abusive relationships, does the Minister's assessment of the situation concur with those statements and what action, if any, will she take in response?

Deputy J.A. Martin of St. Helier (The Minister for Social Security):

Yes, I also read this article in the *Jersey Evening Post* about the reporting of domestic abuse, which can be for many factors and I would urge anybody to approach the police and other services if they have concerns for their safety. The Women's Refuge is an excellent facility and both men and women can get support through Jersey Independent Domestic Violence Advisers. The report also went on ... the policeman speaking said he did not think that reporting is any more under-reported in Jersey, but domestic violence is the most under-reported crime in the western world, so U.K., Europe, it is one of those. There is a lot of shame, there is a lot of worry, there are a lot of other issues. The Deputy asked me what actions I can take. I think this goes back to the philosophical. We need to look at our own domestic rules. I can make exceptional cases. Out of the 367 reported last year, 15 did not have residential qualifications to get income support. I cannot go into those because, as I say, we could identify these people, but at the end of the day this Assembly needs to look at the overarching policies and we need that debate early and we need to decide what we want to do.

4.19.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I thank the Minister for that helpful answer. Given the fact that we have had an earlier indication from the Minister for Children and Housing that there are conversations and ideas around changing the residency rules, would the Minister take it upon herself to also engage - and I am not saying she is not already - in those conversations, to find out what the intended and unintended consequences are of our current housing and income support rules and whether any changes to those may be brought forward, to make it more functional and perhaps, let us say, less discriminatory?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

It is also interesting when I read the *J.E.P. (Jersey Evening Post)* on Saturday, because the Deputy seems to think that under the Migration Policy Board work permits will solve it and that day one people will be entitled to social housing and income support. I am on that Migration Policy Board. I want to know what this Assembly thinks. Maybe the Deputy thinks it is time, because I know he has concerns, we have an in-Committee debate on this. I do not know. I need direction, I need to see this report from the Children's Commissioner. Again, the Minister for Children and Housing says: "We work within our rules." I am told income support is out there, it is a safety net, it is for people who have contributed and nobody minds it is 5 years. I have only seen one report about whether that is the right amount of time and that was by Deputy Le Hérisier, who wanted to put it up to 7 years. In 20 years nobody has had this debate. I really need it and I need to know where we go and I want to cost it as well.

4.19.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Has the Minister used her discretion to offer some support for these 15 victims over the past year?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

As I said, the number is too low out of 367. There are cases that come to my attention for various reasons and it is interesting to read financial abuse is not limited and does not affect people who do not have housing qualifications. It is domestic abuse where one party is not given access to income or anything else, so this is a massive issue. Do not think, because you think you are having a jolly good time and the other partner is paying for anything and everything, that when you want to leave you do not have access to a bank account and then they have got you by the money. These are people who have been here years, born here and this is not Jersey-related and it is not quintile-related. Unfortunately, domestic violence and abuse goes across every earner and society and profession.

4.19.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

I do not disagree with that analysis from the Minister and I am glad she is open to ideas to look at ways that the system might be improved, to avoid any unintended consequences. Just on one subject, she has talked about the fact that once people have been here for 5 years they have contributed, but does she accept that income support, in itself, is a non-contributory benefit and that there are many people, who might have worked here for 4 years and paid into the system, often quite heavily into the system, who get no benefit from income support and others who do not work, for whatever reason, for that entire period, who can claim purely on residency grounds and that might be seen as slightly inequitable, given that there are other contributory benefits, such as sickness benefit, which kicks in just after 6 months?

Deputy J.A. Martin:

The Deputy answered that question. Contributory sick benefit does kick in. The problem is, I think after being in this Assembly long enough I am not saying 5 years is the magic number. I am saying it has always been 5 years. Most people you speak to think people coming to Jersey should not have day one rights. If 5 years is the wrong measure, it needs to be talked about, it needs to openly go out there. I am listening. I need firstly to take it to the Assembly, but the public and the people, day one rights for social housing and social security, income support, will be a big cost. At the same end I am told I have got to limit migration. Make it free day one? I am sorry, the U.K. are in this position. I am not saying we are right. I am listening and any input from the Deputy, the Deputy is in this Government and he came up with some suggestions this morning and he can come and talk to me anytime. He knows where I am.