



Logan House Fire
Support Network INC

"Operating Throughout Qld"

www.lhfsn.org

Fire and Emergency Services (Smoke Alarms) Amendment Bill 2015

Queensland Parliament – Legal Affairs
and Community Safety Committee

Submission by:

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Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee

Thank you for allowing Logan House Fire Support Network, to make a submission for the Fire and Emergency Services (Smoke Alarms) Amendment Bill 2015. I would like to extend a big thank you to Mr Jarrod Bleijie, shadow emergency services minister, for listening to our voices and acting so quickly, this to us has never been about politics, we have only ever wanted our voices heard, and a network like ours should just be that, a network for people to approach, discuss issues with and for us to take it further with discussions on the necessary levels of departments involved or ministers in governments. We have had many discussions with many Ministers on different levels, and instead of telling us we are working on it, Mr Bleijie, listened intently and acted on the information we presented, from having first hand on the ground experience, and information from leading experts in the field of fire safety.

I would like to let the committee know exactly who we are, how we started and what exactly we do.

My name is Louie Naumovski and together with my partner we founded the Logan House Fire Support Network, the network was formed after the devastating house fire in Slacks Creek that occurred on the morning of the 24th August, 2011, that claimed the lives of 11 people, 8 of which were children. We like everyone else in the community were shocked and stunned that so many lives could be lost in a house fire. Why couldn't they escape? Why did they have no warning? What possibly went wrong that fateful morning?

After hearing of the investigation into that dreadful house fire, at the Coronial Inquiry, and from talking to leading experts in the field of Smoke Alarms, we now know why 11 people perished, and I will quickly explain. Many years earlier the home had been fitted with two ionisation smoke alarms, one in the kitchen and one in the living area, as with many islanders, they love their food and cooking is a big part of their lives, sadly the 2 ionisation smoke alarms would constantly activate when they cooked and as there was no fire visible they became annoyed with the unwanted activations and noise, so they disconnected both alarms from the ceiling. As we all know now in the early hours of that morning on the 24th August 2011, a fire started in the office area downstairs of the 2 story home, 14 people were in the home and the patriarch Tau Taufua was alerted to a glow so he went to investigate, that is when he realised a fire erupted and he endeavoured to douse the flames with a hose, sadly the fire took hold of all the furnishings and quickly spread blocking any escape from the front and rear of the home, with flashover occurring in around 2 to 3 minutes. At that hour when most people are sleeping this is not enough time to escape. The first of 31 triple zero calls starting to make their way through to emergency services, unbeknown to any of those callers, 11 people would be trapped and perish in the home and it is now known as Australia's worst ever residential house fire.

We try and work very closely with all Emergency Services especially the Queensland Fire and Emergency Services, so when a house fire occurs we will be notified either via the Queensland Ambulance Service or via social media, the reason we are notified by the Ambulance service is that we tried to establish a notification system with Qld Fire and Emergency Services or Qld Police service, Qld Fire and Rescue Services were afraid that they will be seen to be aligned with Logan House Fire Support Network, and Qld Police could not help as we are not government funded. We are aware that we provide a service that is very valuable and that the government cannot offer, and Qld Fire and Rescue Services have told

us that we help fill a void that they cannot provide. I would like to point out we are the ones to pick up the pieces after all the emergency services have left, when we arrive on scene, we provide immediate emergency accommodation so no family is ever left displaced on the side of the road. I still to this day do not understand why our government services would not want to work with other organisations to make lives more comfortable in a time in distress, we actually take the burden away from emergency services so they can continue to do the fantastic work that they do, remember when I said we pick up the pieces after everyone has gone, we are the ones that operate 24 hours a day 7 days a week, we are the ones that provide food, clothing, accommodation, furniture and even pay for the funerals for loved ones. Think about your family on the side of the road, not knowing what to do immediately after a fire because the emergency services won't align themselves with charity networks, they won't notify organisations because they are playing politics and that family is left displaced for hours on end. Again another NO BRAINER is the simple fix of notifications so organisations can get these families put a roof over their heads as soon as possible, we are now in the year 2016, people should not be displaced.

Since starting the charity, many a nights have been spent with family members that have lost loved ones, many a nights have been spent trying to work out why we have so many house fires and why is the public not aware of what protection they have in their homes to protect themselves in the event of a house fire. We have since learnt, since 2006 not only Qld Fire and Emergency Services but the wider fire services across our country have recommended the use of Photoelectric Smoke Alarms, I need to ask you all, if It has been recommended by our emergency services for the past 10 years what is wrong with the Ionisation Alarms? Let me tell you after 10 long years what is exactly wrong with the Ionisation Alarms, Ionisation Alarms have failed the test for visible smoke since 1993. Let me ask you, is there not smoke before fire? We are commonly told "mine goes off when I cook the toast". If yours goes off when you cook the toast, why are you not calling 000? The usual answer we get is "there was no fire". Well then your alarm is not doing the job it's supposed to be doing (it is actually picking up the heat particles in the toaster, not smoke). Your alarm is not a toaster alerter, if it goes off due to cooking, it should mean there is a problem, not that the toast has popped up, hence why back many years ago the Taufa family did the exact same thing, remember 11 people lost their lives because of the constant nuisance alarms set of by a product that keeps failing not only here in Qld or Australia but all over the world as well.

Back to the alarm failing the smoke test. Ionisation alarms will go off when there is a flame present usually giving you less than 2 minutes to get out of your house. The average response time for a fire truck will get to you in about 7 minutes which means that you have lost your home, possessions, and sometimes a loved one. Remember how I said that it will sound when a flame erupts, well before the flame there will be a smoulder, the ionisation alarm will stay silent as the particles in the smoulder will not activate the Ionisation Alarm. This smoulder will release poisonous gases into the atmosphere, which has the potential to knock you out before a flame erupts to alert you.

We have been fighting to ban Ionisation Alarms and replace with the highly efficient and reliable Photoelectric Smoke Alarms, Photoelectric Smoke Alarms will give you ample warning on a broader range of fires within the home and time to escape. This will allow the Fire Brigade to arrive and extinguish the fire, saving your house, your possessions, your memories and your loved ones. When we talk to the public, clients, media and even some politicians, they all say "Louie, it's a NO BRAINER"

So I say **WHY** since the Qld Coroner handed his findings down into the deadly Slacks Creek House Fire back in November 2014, and again a different Qld coroner handed down his findings into the deadly Tewantin tragedy last November and reiterated what was said one year earlier, that all residential homes in the state of Qld be fitted with an approved smoke alarm, and that approved alarm should be a Photoelectric Smoke Alarm, why have we not banned Ionisation Alarms? Why are people still dying in house fires?

The answers we have received in the past from the current government are “we are working on it”, “we are mindful of the cost to the public”, well let me tell you the easiest simplest solution to resolving this issue, an average 4 bedroom home can be fully protected with 10 year sealed lithium battery Photoelectric Smoke Alarms for the cost of approximately \$400-\$450, and that will cover your house for 10 years, (that equates to around \$40-\$45 per year, less than \$1 a week), there is the NO BRAINER people, to the average family this cost is not excessive, so I ask what exactly is the government working on? When you equate this cost in comparison to paying for a funeral, what price do you put on a life? When you take into account the cost to all levels of government on what a house fire actually costs, the cost to fit a photoelectric smoke alarm in a house is minimal. For example, how much does it cost to have a staffed fire engine at a house fire? How much does it cost for counselling after a fatal house fire? I’m talking from the emergency services all the way down to the demolition teams. What does it cost local and state governments to rehouse uninsured people? The overall savings are not only monetary but physical and emotional as well.

Just like I mentioned earlier, we are serious about working together with this government and emergency services, but feel we have a road block, and we feel the road block is our choice to speak out. We have one wish, and that is for the safety of all Queenslanders, the people making the hard decisions need to heed the advice of the two State Coroners, that have investigated and heard all the evidence into two of the deadliest house fires in Queensland, before we have more tragedies.

The evidence is there; ionisation Alarms are ornaments on the ceiling that tell you when your toast is ready. Photoelectric Smoke Alarms will notify you if there is a fire hazard in your home, but you will have to watch your toast yourselves as a Photoelectric Smoke Alarm won’t let you know when it’s ready.

I urge and call on all levels of government to make the call to mandate and legislate Photoelectric Smoke Alarms, go one step further and Ban the use and sale of Ionisation Alarms before another life is lost. We also want the amendment to have Photoelectric Smoke Alarms fitted to every bedroom where people sleep for the earliest possible warning, and living area as well as the hallways and on each level of the home, we also must state , Photoelectric Smoke Alarms is the first stage of protecting yourself and your home, you will need a Fire Extinguisher, Fire Blanket and a well-rehearsed Fire Escape Plan as well, there needs to be more education and awareness from our government to be implemented into the community.

After all the research we have done on Smoke alarms, we would like the amendment to include.

1. The ban from sale of Ionisation Smoke Alarms immediately
2. All new home built from 1 July 2016 to have Photoelectric Smoke Alarms, with a choice of either Hard wired or 10 year Lithium Battery Alarms. With 1 alarm to the exit of the bedrooms as well as an alarm in each bedroom, and living area.
3. By 1st July 2017 all rentals to have changed over to Photoelectric Smoke Alarms, with 1 to the exit of bedrooms and an alarm in each bedroom, and living area.
4. By 1st July 2019, all home owners to have changed over to Photoelectric Smoke Alarms, with 1 alarm at the exit to the bedrooms as well as an alarm in the bedrooms and living area.
5. That Smoke Alarm checks be added to the Pest and Building report for the buying and selling of properties.
6. That the current way of testing rental smoke alarms be regulated, to stop the cowboys in the industry, who do not test the alarms adequately, leaving tenants unprotected.
7. That a smoke alarm must have a valid rest of life expectancy before it is installed in a premise, as the 10 years starts from date of manufacture, not date of install. (We have been in new houses where the alarms are already 4 years old and the owners are unaware)

The reason we are calling for a choice of hard wired or 10 year Lithium Battery Alarms, is the life expectancy of an alarm is 10 years, many people do not know this. A 10 year Lithium Battery Alarm, has a tamper proof sealed battery which will last the 10 years, therefore causing the owner to have to replace the entire unit, ensuring that they have the best protection. It is also a more economical choice for protection. We have excluded interconnection of the devices for now, as it is more important for us to have Photoelectric Smoke Alarms in the houses as soon as possible. With supply and demand of photoelectric smoke alarms the cost will come down making interconnecting more affordable.

Figures obtained from the Qld Fire and Emergency Services for the year 2015 are as follows,

Brisbane Region 605
Central Region 159
Far Northern Region 100
North Coast Region 217
Northern Region 154
South Eastern Region 519
South Western Region 154

And sadly there were 23 house fire related deaths recorded in Queensland. 23 deaths too many.

That is a total of 1908 house fires for the year 1st January 2015 until 31st December, 2015.

That equates to over 5 house fire everyday just in Queensland, a house fire every 4.8 hours to be exact. Sadly, it also equates to a house fire related fatality every 2.2 weeks. Could I be as bold mention, there were 3 deaths in 2 weeks from domestic violence and legislation was quickly changed to protect endangered women and children. **WHY**, after two coroners reports and a death every 2.2 weeks, has legislation not been as swift? To protect everyone at their most vulnerable in our homes where we sleep.

It is the governments duty of care to notify the public of any issues in regards to public safety, well here we are 10 years later after a known issue, that Ionisation alarms do not pass the CSIRO test for visible smoke, and have failed that test since 1993. Yet they are still allowed to be sold, Photoelectric Smoke Alarms have to pass that test in order to be approved for sale, the Standards are flawed. The government has known about this issue yet continue to play with people's lives, we have heard over and over again, we need to do testing, the testing has been done, over and over, there is no need to continue to waste time and tax payer money doing the same tests over and over again, technology has improved since the Ionisation alarm became available in 1972!! We as a society need to keep up with technology, photoelectric smoke alarm technology has proven that it will work over a broader range of fires. Since 1972 our furnishings have changed, time until flashover (when a fire has totally involved a building) has reduced from a 20 minutes average to a 2.5 minutes average. It is time to update the same way we updated from black and white Televisions, video players to blu-ray players, technology and our environment changes, it's time for the talk to stop, action needs to be taken before more tragedies occur, remember it's a NO BRAINER, as everyone has been saying from leading experts in the smoke alarm field, our own coroners after months of intensive investigations, and senior officials within the emergency services all clearly state only Photoelectric Smoke Alarms be used, stop the slogan any Smoke Alarm is better than none, that again is a political issue that has been sent through to personnel on the front line confusing the public even more.

In summary what we would like to see happen:

Have photoelectric smoke alarms with a 10 year sealed battery in all bedrooms, hallways, living areas and on each level, all new homes must have Photoelectric Smoke Alarms prior to handing over of keys, all rentals have 1 year to change over to photoelectric smoke alarms either at the tenancy change or lease renewal, then all homes to be completed by the year 2019. This certainly is achievable and with an education campaign to highlight the importance and changes it will certainly get the public to move faster to change over and be protected.

The industry for inspections of rental properties needs to be regulated, at the sale of a home it should form part of the building and pest inspections but also needs to be completed by a licenced authority, not some cowboys wanting to go to Bunnings, purchase a step ladder and cordless drill and be allowed to carry out these inspections, we need to regulate and make sure these rogue cowboy outfits are expelled from the industry, they too are putting people's lives at risk, there also needs to be safety inspectors to start issuing fines if people do not comply with the fire safety act. The fines should be substantial, for example; the fine for serving alcohol to a minor is \$29,450 for the management and \$9,424 for the individual bar attendant, the fines for Real Estate Agents (Management) and Smoke Alarm Testing Companies as well as Home Owners (Individual server) who don't comply and put lives at risk should be equivalent, as they are potentially endangering the lives of the occupants. The emergency services do not need to keep witnessing such tragedies and if there are fines in place the community would adhere to them, well most of the people in the community will.

We truly hope this has the correct outcome in the interest of public safety, and I look forward to speaking at the Public Hearing on the 24th of February.