

Queensland Family and Child Commission Submission

To: Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee

Date: 18/03/2016

Topic: Smoke Alarms Inquiries – Fire and Emergency Services (Domestic Smoke Alarms)
Amendment Bill 2016

Submission summary:

This submission provides pertinent facts and advice in relation to deaths of 32 children in 20 separate house fires in the last 12 years, in order to support the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee's consideration of the Fire and Emergency Services (Domestic Smoke Alarms) Amendment Bill 2016.

Submission recommendations:

- The QFCC strongly supports the objectives of the Amendment Bill which would require the installation of photoelectric smoke alarms in specified locations in all dwellings.
- Education and awareness campaigns introducing the new requirements also include elements of fire safety for children.

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The Queensland Family and Child Commission (QFCC) is pleased to provide a submission to the Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee in relation to the Smoke Alarms Inquiries.

The QFCC is responsible for maintaining a register of all child deaths in Queensland and providing the [Annual Report: Deaths of children and young people, Queensland](#) each year. This role allows the QFCC to review the circumstances and causes of child deaths and identify risk factors, patterns and trends. This information can be used to inform and improve child death and injury prevention efforts. The QFCC's Queensland Child Death Register contains detailed data in relation to natural and non-natural deaths of children and young people registered in Queensland since 1 January 2004.

Deaths of children in house fires from 2004 to 2015

The Queensland Child Death Register information on child deaths in house or dwelling fires in the years from 2004 to 2015 indicates that:

- 32 children died in 20 house or dwelling fires in Queensland over the 12 year period. A further 10 adults also lost their lives in these incidents.
- The single worst incident was in 2011 when 8 children and 3 adults died in a house fire.
- Young children are at particular risk in house fires:
 - Half of the deaths (16) were of children aged 1–4 years
 - 7 children were aged 5–9 years
 - 5 children were aged 10–14 years
 - 4 children were aged 15–17 years
 - No deaths occurred of infants under one year.
- Other children and adults managed to escape the fires, with some suffering serious injuries.
- Smoke inhalation was the most common cause of death, indicated for 22 of the 32 deaths.

It should be noted that the Queensland Child Death Register only includes information on house fires where a child or children have died. However, each house fire, whether occupied or unoccupied at the time, is a potential 'near miss' for loss of life.

Causes of house fires, circumstances and use of smoke alarms

Recommendation

The QFCC strongly supports the objectives of the Amendment Bill which would require the installation of photoelectric smoke alarms in specified locations in all dwellings.

Coronial investigations are not always able to conclusively determine all related facts due to the confusion and trauma experienced by survivors and witnesses in terrifying circumstances, and the substantial destruction caused by the fire. Known or likely causes of the house fires which resulted in child deaths included heating or lighting equipment, candles, electrical faults and cooking oil. Tragically, more than one quarter of the fires appeared to be accidentally started by children playing with lighters.

In relation to the use and operation of smoke alarms in the 20 house fire incidents:

- In 9 house fires there were no smoke alarms or no operational smoke alarms (18 child deaths), while in 8 house fires smoke alarms were in place and believed to be operational (11 child deaths). No information was available for 3 incidents (3 child deaths).
- The greatest loss of life occurred in night-time house fires, with 11 lives lost in one fire and another 11 lost in three other fires (four each in two house fires and three in another).

- Importantly, in three night-time house fires the smoke alarms woke the occupants allowing some occupants time to escape. In a fourth day-time house fire the smoke alarm also provided the first alert of the fire.
- In one coronial investigation there was evidence that the ionisation type smoke alarms did not activate.

The QFCC strongly supports the proposal to require the installation of photoelectric smoke alarms in all dwellings, which have now been recommended in coronial investigations into two separate fatal house fires. Witness reports clearly indicate the speed with which the fatal fires have developed, and the importance and urgency that should be placed on evacuating all occupants as quickly as possible. Every minute is vital to protect lives, and functioning and appropriately located smoke alarms contribute to providing the earliest warning possible.

Recommendation

The QFCC recommends that education and awareness campaigns introducing the new requirements also include elements of fire safety for children.

Teaching children from a young age about fire safety can be a very important contributor to keeping children safe in the event of a fire. Queensland Child Death Register data demonstrates that young children are particularly vulnerable to harm from house fires, with nearly three quarters (72%) of all house fire related child deaths occurring in children aged under 10. The pre-school and primary school environments represent a valuable opportunity to implement developmentally appropriate fire safety education and awareness campaigns. The QFCC therefore recommends that education and awareness campaigns which introduce the new requirements, if passed, would also include elements of fire safety for children.